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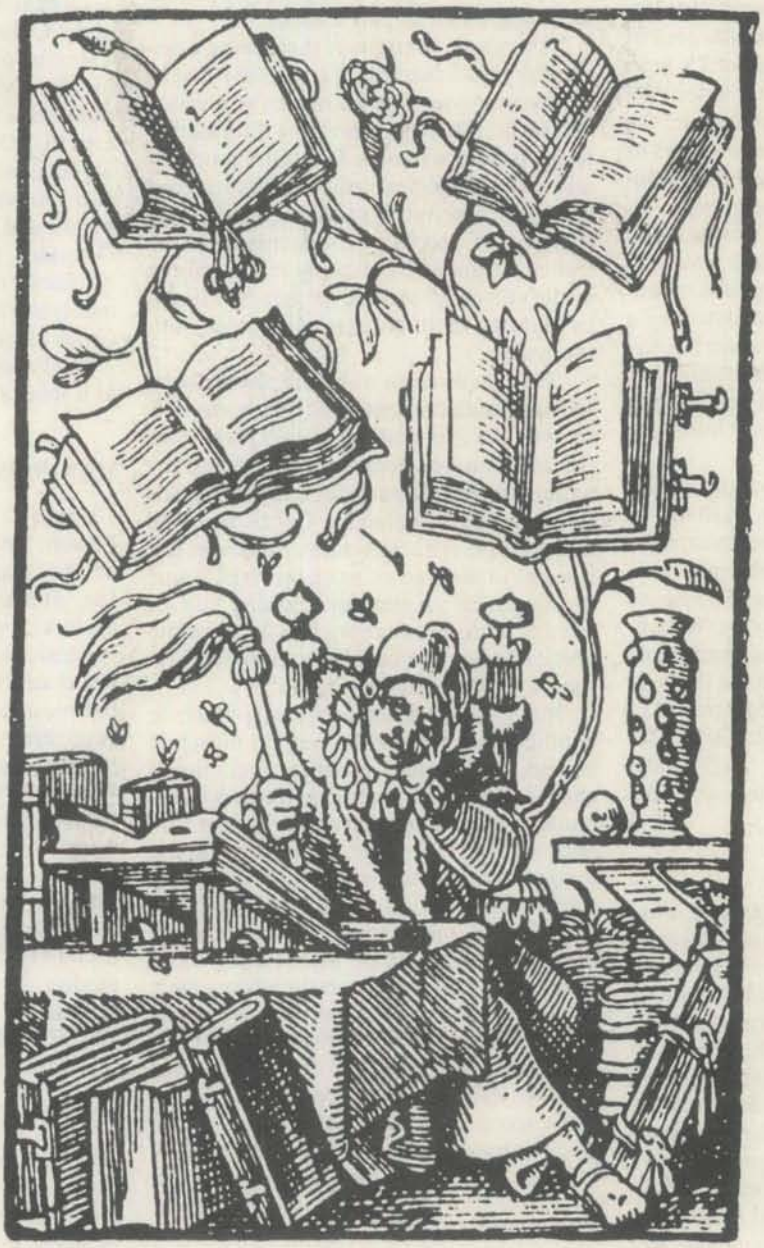

HENRY LOUIS GATES JR. ON WILLIAMS'S RACE & RIGHTS

JOHN LEONARD ON KUNDERA'S IMMORTALITY

ANDREW KOPKIND ON DUBERMAN'S CURES

TED SOLOTAROFF ON HELPRIN'S SOLDIER

JON WIENER ON WOODWARD'S COMMANDERS

LEWIS COLE ON PHILLIPS'S LUNCH

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LETTERS.

FAIR GAME

New York City

Alexander Cockburn's March 18 "Beat the Devil" column may have left a misimpression about FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting). We do not believe that all would be well if only the media would stick "a balancing liberal in the talk-show lineup." As FAIR's studies of *Nightline* and *MacNeil/Lehrer* documented, the spectrum on these shows runs from establishment liberal to the right wing. FAIR campaigns to open up these programs to forthrightly progressive and left perspectives.

Will this alone bring about peace and plenty? No. But as a progressive media activist group, we'd be remiss not to target TV news programs that purport to offer a serious debate on the issues but offer nothing of the sort. When FAIR's criticism helps leaders of progressive groups gain access to these national forums, it is a boost to these groups.

FAIR has many other targets, among them: the concentration of the media into fewer corporate hands; the takeover of public broadcasting by big business; government/media disinformation about Central America, the Middle East and elsewhere; the revolving door between the government and media elite (*Nightline*'s executive producer just joined the Bush Administration).

At FAIR we don't just mourn the media, we organize. During the gulf war, FAIR helped thousands of activists respond directly to media bias. Thanks to jingoistic war coverage in recent months, FAIR has experienced a massive influx of new members and activists. We constantly explore new strategies for challenging the pro-corporate, militarist biases of the mass media. *Nation* readers who are interested in FAIR's activities can contact us at: 130 W. 25th Street, New York, NY 10001. *Jeff Cohen*
director, FAIR

COCKBURN REPLIES

Petrolia, Calif.

I've got nothing particularly against what FAIR does, and I've spent many nights (sometimes on platforms organized by FAIR) urging people to give a hard time to local PBS station/network affiliates, national networks, *MacNeil/Lehrer*, Koppel show, NPR, hateful *All Things Considered*, pusillanimous *Morning Edition* and disgusting Daniel Schorr show.

But as I've also often said on many platforms, there's a limit to all this, and people's expectations should not be raised too high. It's not a seesaw that, if our end jumps hard enough or onloads enough poundage, will level out so that we'll see as many smart intelligent types on the box as we do idiots. The system is always self-correcting to the bias of capital and property, and the executive producer of *Nightline* will always have an inherent tendency to favor the White House and not FAIR.

We know this and we still work against the self-correcting tendency, as responsible people should. But recent events in the Middle East reminded us of something. In times of trial the system self-corrects in the direction of an electronic Nuremberg rally, at lightning speed, as happened on January 17 when for the crucial opening sessions of war we had retired generals and utterly cowed broadcasters all over the mainstream media. The only oases were independent institutions like the Pacifica stations and other listener-subscriber radio, plus papers outside the corporate sector.

A reader recently wrote me as follows, after attending a talk by Jeff Cohen:

"The whole question of there being a discernible media *bias* that, if *corrected*—that is, if *balanced*—would then make the media a successful system for providing information to the populace is nuts. The entire problematic of the ideological system is misconstrued when it's conceived like this. Yet there was no shortage of people in the audience at the Cohen lecture who obviously think that the media's ills could be cured (or greatly reduced) by allowing more divergent viewpoints into the system.

"Here, once again as before, the sense of self-congratulation creeps in. Cohen was elated over the fact that *MacNeil/Lehrer* gave Chomsky one ten-minute spot re the gulf situation way back in early September. The audience roundly applauded Cohen when he mentioned it. An achievement, no doubt. But it seems to me a lot of work on FAIR's part just to punch ten minutes of reality into an eternity of disinformation. Has to be a more profitable way for dissidents to invest their time and effort. Just has to be."

One effort does not necessarily preclude another, but I wish all the support mustered behind FAIR could produce institutional change, like maybe getting the Federal Communications Commission off the back of low-watt radio. At the moment people attempting to operate these limited-range, low-power radio stations are subject to devastating harassment by the F.C.C. and by local police working on the commission's behalf. Maybe FAIR could spearhead a campaign to get the law changed, or finance a lawsuit by one of these persecuted individuals, who not surprisingly tend to be from poor neighborhoods. There are dozens of other ways that efforts to enhance democratic access to the means of communication could be mounted, as I'm sure Cohen already knows. *Alexander Cockburn*

FULL DISCLOSURE

Cambridge, Mass.

Slavenka Drakulić is quick to denounce rising nationalism, but she fails to mention some of the main reasons ["Letter From Yugoslavia," March 4]. In Croatia's case in particular, the Serbian minority has long enjoyed a privileged position in government, industry and the police force, and the federal bureaucracy and the military high command are disproportionately Serbian, which rankles the majority, non-Serbian Yugoslavs.

Perhaps, in the interest of full disclosure, you could have pointed out that Drakulić is herself Serbian. *Josip Martin*

DRAKULIĆ REPLIES

Zagreb, Yugoslavia

The topic of my article wasn't the origin of ethnic nationalism. But Josip Martin had another aim in mind—to point out that I am Serbian and therefore not objective in writing about Croatia, or Yugoslavia for that matter. This kind of twisted logic speaks more about his objectivity than mine. Martin should have done some research. He would have discovered that Drakulić is a Croatian as well as a Serbian name. Drakulićs were originally Romanians who escaped before the Turkish invasion and later became Catholic or Greek Orthodox, i.e., became Croats or Serbs. My real family name (Drakulić is my ex-husband's name) is in fact Croatian. I have so-called pure Croat blood.

But I don't think my nationality defines me as a journalist, or a human being.
Slavenka Drakulić

MÄNNERS MUSIK

Chicago

Edward Said didn't comment on one aspect of the Maazel/Vienna *Elektra* ["Music," May 6] that should interest *Nation* readers: the lack of women in the Vienna Philharmonic. Music lovers may argue over which orchestra, if any, ranks these days as number one, but most would agree on three "superstar" ensembles: the Berlin Symphony Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Vienna. While two of them persist in their male-only composition, the C.S.O. retains its world-class quality with women well represented in all sections. We hear that this is achieved naturally through blind auditions.

That leads to another sensitive issue: American orchestras are coming under pressure to modify these blind-audition policies so as to promote a more desirable racial mixture. Where should liberal music lovers stand in that debate? *Conrad Weisert*

WHOOO CAN SAY?

Block Island, R.I.

Christopher Hitchens may be right about the "October surprise" ["Minority Report," April 22], but he has something to learn about owls. Their wings do not go "whoosh." Rare among feathered creatures, owls fly silently, which may make them an even more apt symbol for Hitchens's case, and helps explain why it took Gary Sick so long to spot this particular type of predatory behavior.
P.S. Wood

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EDITORIALS.

Quoting History

As Leon Friedman, who along with Floyd Abrams and the American Civil Liberties Union was counsel for this magazine in Harper & Row v. Nation Enterprises, *reports below, Congress is on the brink of rectifying a serious copyright wrong. Eight years after Harper & Row sued* The Nation *for quoting without permission former President Gerald Ford's forthcoming memoirs, the mainstream publishers have finally come to understand what Friedman, PEN American Center, the Organization of American Historians and others who appeared as witnesses for or submitted amicus briefs on behalf of* The Nation *tried to tell them all along. Namely, that to harass a small, dissenting magazine for publishing an article that exposed the deal behind Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon, using Ford's own facts and citing his own words, could lead to broader intrusions on the work of journalists, biographers and historians at the cost of the free flow of ideas and the free range of investigative journalism.*

At the time, the old boy network at the Association of American Publishers backed Harper & Row's request that the courts forbid any use, fair or otherwise, of prepublication material. Now even HarperCollins (Harper & Row's successor) has seen the error of its ways and supports with the A.A.P. the effort to get Congress to begin to repair the damage to free inquiry. —*The Editors*

The historian's craft may have been saved by a compromise, recently announced by Senator Paul Simon, among writers, publishers and representatives of the computer industry to amend the fair-use provisions of the copyright law. What do the computer industry and copyright law have to do with the writing of history?

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The problem that the new amendment attempts to resolve flows directly from a case involving *The Nation*. The Supreme Court found the magazine liable for copyright infringement because it quoted about 300 words from the unmemorable memoirs of Gerald Ford in an article printed before the book was published. A federal district court had held that the entire article infringed the former President's copyright since the fair-use doctrine did not apply. Fair use applies to "news," said the judge, and there was nothing newsworthy in the article since there was nothing "new" in it.

The Supreme Court could not accept that trial judge's theory, but it did uphold the finding of copyright infringement on the basis of the 300 words actually quoted from the unpublished manuscript of more than 200,000 words. Fair use, said Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, applies in a much narrower way to unpublished writings than to published materials; therefore, quoting even this small percentage of material violated the copyright laws.

In two subsequent cases the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit carried this decision to ridiculous lengths, establishing a virtual per se rule that fair use cannot apply to *any* quotation from unpublished material—not only about-to-be-published manuscripts but unpublished letters, journals, diaries, memorandums, etc., no matter how old and even if lawfully obtained. Thus the author of a biography of J.D. Salinger published by Random House was not allowed to quote about 250 words from letters acquired from library collections, and the writer of a biography of L. Ron Hubbard published by Henry Holt & Company would have been unable to quote a small excerpt from Hubbard's journals but for the fact that the plaintiff had waited too long to bring the lawsuit. "Unpublished works normally enjoy complete protection," said the court in the *Hubbard* case; "the copying of 'more than minimal amounts' of unpublished material calls for an injunction barring the unauthorized use."

At that point, historians and biographers and magazine and book publishers woke up to the fact that the doctrine announced in the *Nation* case and applied in *Salinger* and *Hubbard* had made it virtually impossible for authors to quote from original source materials. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote a blistering attack on the decision in *The Wall Street Journal* that helped to alert a wider community. How can one write history if primary source material is off-limits to an author? he asked. How can copyright laws be applied to letters written decades ago that the letter writer (who may now be dead) never intended for publication?

The controversy shows how easy it is for problems to be created by the courts and how difficult it is to get Congress to correct them (witness the effort to pass a new civil rights bill to overrule a handful of unexpected and warped Supreme Court decisions dealing with employment discrimination). After the Supreme Court declined to review the *Hubbard* case, writers' and publishers' groups began to petition Congress to correct the problem. PEN American Center (which I represented), the Authors Guild (represented by Floyd Abrams and J. Anthony Lukas) and the Association of American Publishers (led by Nicholas Veliotes and prodded by Harriette Dorsen of Bantam Doubleday Dell) urged Congress to amend the fair-use provisions to eliminate the per se rule established in *Salinger* and *Hubbard*.

A bill to that end was introduced last year by Robert Kastenmeier, chair of the House intellectual property subcommittee and a leading copyright expert. But the computer industry objected since its source codes and software are considered unpublished material and thus were protected under the ruling in the *Nation* case. The industry helped block consideration of the amendment, and when Kastenmeier was defeated in his 1990 bid for re-election, all seemed lost.

Enter Helen Stephenson and Liz Robbins of the Authors Guild and Senator Paul Simon. This year, the guild took an active role in persuading members of Congress of the importance of the amendment. Groups of leading historians and biographers enlisted by the guild, including David Halberstam, Geoffrey Ward, Kati Marton and Hannah Pakula, traveled to Washington to lobby for the amendment. Floyd Abrams, Kenneth Vittor of McGraw-Hill and Jon Baumgarten of the A.A.P. took an active role in drafting the technical language of the bill.

Finally, on May 9, Senator Simon announced that representatives of the writers', publishers' and computer groups had reached general agreement on the language of a compromise bill that would eliminate the problem created by the *Salinger* and *Hubbard* decisions. The language reads: "The fact that a work is unpublished is an important element which tends to weigh against a finding of fair use, but shall not diminish the importance traditionally accorded to any other consideration under this section, and shall not bar a finding of fair use, if such finding is made upon full consideration of all the above factors."

The compromise bill has wide backing in both the Senate and the House, where William Hughes of New Jersey has succeeded Kastenmeier as chair of the intellectual property subcommittee, and it is expected to become law this year.

LEON FRIEDMAN

Leon Friedman is a professor of copyright law at Hofstra University Law School and acts as counsel to PEN American Center.

Spring Medley

Grabbing a weekend away from my suburban home (where one mows the lawn and hopes that the bluebirds will nest again in their bluebird box), I got up for a couple of days to a camp on the Canadian border that I've used for two decades as a bathysphere in the ocean of nature. The shadbushes were just beginning to bloom—sparse tiny flowers with a faint but piercingly sweet scent that presages the wild cherry, apple and lilac blossoms that soon follow. My house had stood empty for many months, and so when I set a fire bucket with water in it outside the door, a raccoon came by and lapped from it: this because he was wild, not because he was tame.

A porcupine walked up the middle of the road as I stood listening to a grouse drum, and to yellowthroats, ovenbirds,

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a Nashville warbler and a winter wren (the longest song in the woods). I heard a snipe flinging itself about the sky in its mating flight, and then a woodcock doing the same, only vertically. At dusk an owl struck up a tattoo of hoots, and a pair of ravens croaked on the cliff. Like the owls, they start nesting sooner than most other birds because they give their young more instruction in how to live life. A wood thrush sang nearer my house, staking a territory with its roundly flutelike, beautifully measured, interrogatory-sounding notes. Then it fell silent in the dark, as the spring peepers began strongly singing down at the pond with a ringing noise incongruously like sleigh bells. The raccoon ambled downhill to hunt them, and you could hear his progress around the shallows as the singing would stop and pick up again.

In the morning, tree swallows hawked overhead after early bugs. Swamp sparrows sang, and white-throated sparrows. This whole citizenry of rose-breasted grosbeaks and brown thrashers is familiar to me, and I found both moose and bear tracks on the animal thoroughfares that pass by my house from a wild place called Stillwater Swamp to a wild place called Big Valley, each three miles away. A friend told me that a yearling bear tried to hibernate in my hayloft last fall, until it was frightened off, and I found its diggings and dung liberally evident in the barn. In such bear-rich country that hayloft must have seemed for a while like safe, neutral ground to a young creature harassed and bullied by bigger bears when it approached traditional locations.

My former farmstead, tucked in a notch between forested lowlands, has its raccoon years and its fox years, and we now seemed to be entering a coon year. Coons would be the summer's predator, though in other years foxes have denned a hundred yards from my house and chased my chickens so hard that they (the foxes) ran right smack into my legs. But the particular den they use had a skunk family living in it. Foxes would have put a crimp in the style of a bunch of raccoons, preying on many of the same beasties—but these coons, by their tracks, were ubiquitous.

I was puzzled, however, to notice under a huge white pine up on a rise—a pine left by the loggers on their last go-through because it was crotched (a "schoolmarm tree")—a collection of largish, rather doggy scats, as if this were a lookout point for somebody who belonged to the fox family. Also, in walking, I saw an abundance of rabbit activity about; and rabbits are what bring foxes back to an area they have previously hunted clean and abandoned. So why weren't they here?

A red-tailed hawk carried a snake away in its claws, and I listened to a brown creeper's little lisp and to a pewee's *pee-ah-weee* song, as well as to the porcupine chewing on a timber in my barn with a steady rasp like a carpenter's file. Most birds as they sang were answered by at least one rival male that had claimed an adjoining territory, so I felt a bit worried that the single wood thrush had no musical challengers. These thrushes, wintering in Central America, are dwindling alarmingly, like the rain forest, and with no near rivals, no necessary boundaries to maintain, their lovely song may become superfluous. How long will those that even survive continue to sing?

The second evening, I sat outdoors listening to a veery's ethereal, liquid, downward-spiraling call and watching the snipe's mating flight back and forth and around the sky. Then the myriad peepers piped up with their nightly ringing. I blew into a harmonica, which disturbed only the nearest pair of owls, which had been gabbing with each other the way owls often do. They paused, seemed nonplused, added a few more hoots from their cluster of spruces and flew away.

I kept playing, not to be disruptive but because it's my notch too. The frogs and the veery were not perturbed. And as if answering the instrument, there suddenly came a yodeling from farther down the slope—a baying, a barking, a ki-yi-ing and a howling, all balled up into one commanding, startling burst of sound. My immediate thought was that one of the hikers who I knew were camped down the road must be pretending to be a coyote. But the yodeling continued at intervals of a minute or two, moving closer to me through the woods more quickly than any hiker could in the dark. I next imagined that it might be a lost lonely dog, probably with porcupine quills in its nose, because of the high-pitched keening that loudly interrupted the barks.

In the West and in Vermont I have heard coyotes, but never opening up in full throat so close at hand. I realized now that's what they were—two or three chasing a snowshoe hare in a circle, after howling abruptly to put a squirt of the scent of fear into its smell, or perhaps into that of a doe crouching by a spring fawn as they rushed by. I could hear a tumbling, yelping scrimmage in the dry leaves a few hundred yards off, and a likely capture, though I couldn't tell if they had grabbed the rabbit, a scrambling red squirrel, or what; it sounded as if they were wolfing it down and having a little trouble "sharing." Then they moved on, but did stop again after a silence to howl enthusiastically in harmonic, concerted response to my mouth organ—*You howl, we'll howl!*—and rushed up the rise to their rendezvous point under the jumbo white pine.

Coyotes hunt foxes as well as rabbits (a coon climbs a tree). So that's why there were no foxes in my notch and valley this season, I thought, as I packed to depart.

EDWARD HOAGLAND

Edward Hoagland is the author of thirteen books and is currently at work on his memoirs.

★

ON THE QUEEN'S VISIT TO ALICE FRAZIER'S HOUSE IN SOUTHEAST WASHINGTON

When Mrs. F. embraced the Queen,
They jumped as if there'd been a mugging.
The rules say royals can't be touched.
But Lord, that Queen could use some hugging!

Calvin Trillin

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BEAT THE DEVIL.

The P.C. Crusade in Nicaragua

Absurd though the hysteria about political correctness may be—last week Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska threatened to cut the Smithsonian's funding in retribution for its "West As America" exhibit discussed here two weeks ago—the campaign has a vicious undertow. The aim, after all, is to extirpate such vestiges of dissent as survive in the nation's education system. In this sense, analogies between the red scare of the '50s and the P.C. scare of the '90s are appropriate, even though people aren't going to jail yet for refusing to name the person who first recommended they read Derrida.

The campaign stems from the age-old terror of infection of the young with alien notions. The contours of that fear are being strikingly revealed in Nicaragua, with a battle over the primers now being forced on its schoolchildren. Here is political correctness on imperialism's cutting edge.

Back in the early 1980s, among the staples in any North American catalogue of Sandinista totalitarian techniques was the reading manual that included words like "rifle" and other terms familiar to a nation under siege. These, proclaimed U.S. journalists, were the sinister tools of communist indoctrination. Now supervising the destruction of such tools is Nicaragua's Minister of Education, Humberto Belli. *Nation* readers with powerful memories may recall that Belli's name came up in these pages more than once after former *contra* leader Edgar Chamorro disclosed that Belli had written a book financed by the C.I.A., whose sponsorship had been occluded by the work's "publisher," the Puebla Institute [see "Letters," November 7, 1987]. As minister, Belli is enforcing an anti-P.C. crusade—in effect, dismantling an educational enterprise that under the Sandinistas pushed illiteracy down to 20 percent, built 500 primary schools, forty-eight secondary schools and, providing free instruction, doubled the number of students.

Belli's first onslaught was upon the primers. The Ministry of Education collected and replaced all the second- and third-grade readers in the country. By then it had secured a $12.2 million grant from U.S.A.I.D. whose stated purpose is to provide "over 7 million updated, de-politicized textbooks for primary and secondary school students." Involved in this program is our old friend the National Endowment for Democracy, the bipartisan slush fund administered by Schachtmanite hellspawn. The N.E.D. is running reindoctrination courses for 300 Nicaraguan teachers, probably forcing them to chant in unison the works of A.M. Rosenthal, who recently devoted what was even for him an especially lunatic column on the glories of the N.E.D. If anything hastens Sandinista resurgence, this will be it.

Aside from predictable denunciations of divorce and abortion, the books depict family values in North American iconography: children with European features, Dad in jacket and tie, Mom in front of the sewing machine, an implement not in the possession of many Nicaraguan households.

In a February 17 interview in *Barricada*, Belli remarked, "A destroyed home is the same thing as an impoverished home. There is an exact correlation. Blacks are three times poorer because they have three times as much family disintegration." Thus did Belli reflect the views of the U.S. sociology establishment, introducing Nicaragua to the concepts of Daniel Patrick Moynihan which he no doubt absorbed as a sociology student in the United States in the 1970s.

The day after the interview Belli tried to quell his critics by saying that he had been referring to blacks in the United States and not on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, eliciting from the paper's editor, Carlos Chamorro, the retort that this "would be as offensive to North American blacks as to Atlantic Coast residents." Not merely as offensive but also as deeply familiar, especially to those exposed to Moynihan's writings on black "pathology" or to the supremacist ideas of the anthropologist Vincent Sarich, defended from the P.C. hordes not long ago by *Newsweek*.

Belli's high school textbooks continue the campaign. One gives only nonchalant reference to the Monroe Doctrine and claims that U.S. interventions have brought "peace and stability" to Central America. A fourth-grade textbook initiated by Belli had to be recalled so that several vitriolic pages about the Sandinistas could be excised. Another book had a chapter on Nicaraguan national heroes omitting not only Carlos Fonseca but also Sandino. And this is only part of the campaign against enlightenment. Late last year Belli's ministry ordered the burning of 4 million textbooks on history, geography and language sent by the government of Norway, claiming they reflected leftist thinking. No doubt braced by this, the librarian in Leon burned fifty novels and books of poetry by Sandinista authors.

The introduction of new books coincides with a purge of suspect teachers, with more than 370 people removed from their posts since UNO took office. At the onset of the new government Sofonías Cisneros, then Education Minister and also Belli's boss, said, "We don't want wise teachers; we want loyal ones." Thousands of teachers are now on strike, protesting wage cuts and political witch-hunting. On March 3, Nicaraguan universities suffered a severe budget cut—actually a 160 percent "increase" in funds just after the currency had been devalued by 400 percent. Demonstrations brought a hard-line reaction: direct attacks on the university system from government radio and television.

Such are the modalities of the anti-P.C. crusade. Up here we have an intellectual Vendée going hand in hand with budget cutbacks for education; and down there, in an altogether harsher idiom, very much the same thing.

Democrats, Trade, Workers

One beneficial consequence of the gulf war has been the extinction of normal seasonal chatter about Democratic contenders for the presidency. For once, rhetoric and reality have been in perfect fit: bipartisan government, President elected by that small proportion of the populace entitled and prepared to vote, all other parties denied access to electoral politics by cunning exclusionary laws.

I was in Iowa in late April, and the devastation to the election industry was visible: barbershop savants listlessly reciting rustic apothegms into the mirror, the political correspondent

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ALEXANDER COCKBURN

of *The Des Moines Register* reduced to essays about the respective merits of proportional representation in Israel and the Irish Republic. One farmer told me his milk yields were up 30 percent from the equivalent period in the spring of 1987, when the networks had installed TV arc lights in his dairy to save the bother of day-to-day setups for visiting Democratic candidates.

There are now troubling signs that this season of peace is nearing its end and once again "Democratic hopefuls" will go about their designated quadrennial task of deluding Americans into the belief that we inhabit a two-party democratic system. Someone even muttered to me the words "Tom Harkin may run," raising the added menace of a "real liberal" on the lists. Soon the pundits will be rating Harkin's chances against Jay Rockefeller's. Senior Democrats in Congress actually reckon Bush is certain to win and would prefer someone like Bentsen to make a token race, hoping such a conservative would not sufficiently offend voters as to cause the Democrats to lose control of the Senate and slash their majority in the House.

As for Harkin, he has fine liberal credentials, including the honor of receiving more pro-Israel PAC money than all but two senators. At least in part he owes his ascent to Congress, in 1974, to just the sort of know-nothing outburst that Senator Stevens vented against the Smithsonian.

At that time the incumbent in Iowa's Fifth Congressional District was William Scherley, whose essential function was to body forth the glories of the dairy industry. As a sideline Scherley liked to thunder against injuries to the taxpayer, in the manner of William Proxmire's Golden Fleece Awards. Scherley seized upon a National Endowment for the Arts grant to George Plimpton to produce Volume II of *The American Literary Anthology*, a culling of work from small literary magazines. Among the contents of this splendid work was a one-word poem by Aram Saroyan, "lightht". Scherley had a field day, convulsing Congress with his tremendous philippics about the manic extravagance of the arty crowd. For "lightht", he bellowed, the U.S. taxpayer via Plimpton had put up $500 to Saroyan and $250 to the *Chicago Review*, which originally published the terse lyric.

Plimpton was chagrined and vowed revenge. Ever the man of action, he journeyed to Scherley's Congressional district. There his eye fell upon an obscure Democratic contender running a gallant but apparently doomed race against the incumbent. A former aide to Senator Dick Clark, Harkin was best known for his vivid account in *Life* of the infamous tiger cages on Con Son Island in South Vietnam. Having ascertained that Harkin was determined to see the race through, Plimpton informed him that he desired nothing so much as the political demise of Scherley and would now devote himself to raising prodigious sums for the Harkin campaign from the swollen purses of Manhattan liberals.

Soon Harkin's name was a byword in salons on the East Side, as Plimpton portrayed in moving terms the promise of this bucolic symbol of all that was finest in American political life. Contributions flowed. Plimpton recalled for me as though it were yesterday the manner in which he tasted the sweet fruits of revenge. He had, he said, just returned from a trip to Africa and strode through customs into the Pan Am terminal at JFK. He dashed to the newsstand to ascertain the results of the midterm elections, which had taken place the day before. A bray of triumph startled those around the newsstand as Plimpton raised his arms in victory. Harkin had won by 3,463 votes.

At the other end of the tiny Democratic spectrum from Harkin are the favored love children of the Democratic Leadership Council, which recently held its convention in Cleveland and presented its political credo, "The New Choice in American Politics," a familiar blend of opportunism, folly, flagwagging ignorance intermingled with rococo detail, like a sudden paean to the N.E.D., discussed above.

Among the platform pledges came this: "The U.S. must use its enormous market power to expand fair and free trade around the world. We urge Congress to extend 'fast track' negotiating authority for a free trade pact with Mexico that will lead to higher incomes and employment in both countries, conditioned on a credible plan by the Administration for addressing potential job losses and labor and environmental standards."

Also in Cleveland, at the very moment that the Democrats were making this call, was a meeting of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. addressed by a group of people whose experience resumes almost every horror facing the American working class. These were nonunionized Procter Silex workers from North Carolina whose parent company, NACCO Industries of Cleveland, recently announced it was moving 800 jobs to a *maquiladora* in Juárez, Mexico. As Greg LeRoy reports in an upcoming issue of "Labor Notes," those displaced are left without severance, without health care, without retraining or placement help of any kind. They will get no assistance from the state, which has exhausted its federal dislocated-worker fund, and, in a straitened local economy, will have bleak prospects once their meager unemployment pay runs out.

This familiar portrait of displacement coincides with an equally familiar demographic ecology. Of the workers, 90 percent are women, 50 percent are black and 20 percent Lumbee Indian. They made coffee machines and other household appliances in a factory partly built on a contaminated dump site. Five years ago the company buried toxic wastes that can cause liver damage and cancer, and paved over the area for a plant extension and parking lot—an environmental hazard that is replicated across the country in areas heavily populated by low-wage blacks, Latinos and Native Americans. Since then, according to the workers, at least fifty of their number have died of cancer and twelve more are sick with it. NACCO's appalling behavior has not distressed at least two of its directors, John Sawhill, the president and C.E.O. of the Nature Conservancy, and Frank Taplin, a trustee of the Environmental Defense Fund, both of whom, LeRoy reports, have made no response to the workers' calls for environmental accountability.

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BELTWAY BANDITS.

DAVID CORN

■ A Horatio Alger Tale for the '90s

The rich are different. Take the case of Neil Bush, that struggling entrepreneur who just cannot seem to find his niche. A report recently issued by the House Committee on Small Business reveals precisely how the President's son was able to parlay a $3,000 investment into $160,000—with the help of U.S. taxpayers. This was the deal: On May 25, 1989, the young Bush and a partner, Brent Morse, bought 51 percent of the Apex Energy Corporaton, which had been established three days earlier for the purpose of acquiring methane properties. The other 49 percent of the company was purchased for $10,000 by two federally licensed small business investment corporations (S.B.I.C.s) associated with Louis Marx Jr., an oil and gas man and longtime friend of George Bush. These two corporations, which are government-guaranteed, pumped another $2.3 million into Apex.

Apex used those funds to buy a lease on property in Wyoming where methane gas might be found. Who held this lease? Two companies, one owned by Neil Bush and one owned by Morse. So Bush and Morse used taxpayer-backed funds to purchase a lease from themselves. Since they were both on the payroll of Apex, they also took these funds as salary, Bush's annual remuneration coming to $160,000.

One of the S.B.I.C.s estimated that if Bush struck methane, profits would exceed $50 million. But at the end of the first year of operation, Apex was more than $700,000 in the hole, and the property in Wyoming was found not to have sufficient methane to warrant development. The scheme was a bust. The Committee on Small Business notes that because the two S.B.I.C.s have gone belly up, the federal government might have to pick up some of the tab for the Apex venture. Of course, there is no evidence that the Apex arrangement was illegal or improper. As of April 4, Bush had sold his stock and resigned in search of other opportunities.

■ From *Contra* War to Drug War

Richard Gadd may soon be flying for the government again. On May 1 the State Department awarded a five-year $100 million contract to Dynacorp, an aviation service, to conduct air operations for the war on drugs in Latin America. The contract covers flying and managing the aircraft used in drug raids, eradication campaigns and reconnaissance of drug-growing areas. Dynacorp has proposed using three subcontractors on the project, including Eagle Aviation Services and Technology, a company well experienced in Central America. EAST was enlisted by retired Gen. Richard Secord as part of the secret *contra* supply operation.

EAST's founder, Lieutenant Colonel Gadd, was an Air Force specialist in covert operations before he retired in 1982 and started several private companies that supported classified military activity. His particular talent lay in chartering aircraft for the Pentagon and the C.I.A. in such a way that the planes could not be traced back to the United States. In 1985, Secord hired EAST and Gadd's other outfits to ferry weapons to the *contras* and build an airstrip for them in Costa Rica. Soon afterward Oliver North introduced Gadd to Foggy Bottom, and Gadd won a contract to haul "nonlethal" supplies to the *contras*. The enterprising Gadd managed at least one mission in which his crew merged nonmilitary cargo with arms—at a time when Congress prohibited military aid to the *contras*.

■ Pragmatism and Its Problems

Last fall the Natural Resources Defense Council initiated talks with Conoco, an oil company and subsidiary of Du Pont. The subject was Conoco's interest in drilling in the Ecuadorean rain forest. The N.R.D.C. has been a leader in the campaign against the oil industry's destruction of the Oriente region of Ecuador, where corporations have spilled vast amounts of oil, dumped up to 4.3 million gallons of hazardous wastes a day into waterways and buried toxic drilling mud. But in its effort to do good, the N.R.D.C. has got too close to the enemy.

In April a representative of the Corporation for the Defense of Life (known by its Spanish acronym, Cordavi) came to Washington and passed around minutes of a meeting between the N.R.D.C. and Conoco. Cordavi, sort of an Ecuadorean N.R.D.C., was outraged by what it viewed as a unilateral attempt by the N.R.D.C. to negotiate an environmental treaty with Conoco. The environmental organization and the oil company discussed setting up a foundation that would provide environmental oversight of Conoco's prospective operation in an area that until recently was protected national parkland. The N.R.D.C. suggested Conoco kick in $25 million for the project; Conoco proposed $5 million, which it later doubled. Cordavi accused the N.R.D.C. of bypassing the region's indigenous people, who are threatened by the development, and of undermining the work of Ecuadorean environmentalists, who still hope to block drilling in the territories in question. Other U.S. organizations fighting to preserve this region, among them the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth, have let the N.R.D.C. know that they think it was out of line.

The N.R.D.C., which decried Ecuador's decision to open national parkland to drilling, argued that oil exploitation there is inevitable; thus, it makes sense to talk to Conoco, the only company that has expressed any concern about Big Oil's impact on the Oriente. Better a spoiler with a pretense to conscience. But in response to the flap caused by Cordavi's protests, the N.R.D.C. has shifted its role and now says it will serve only as a facilitator between the indigenous people and Conoco. Meanwhile, the Sierra Club released material charging that oil companies threatened to halt all their operations in Ecuador if the government did not allow them in national parks. In tape-recorded remarks, an official of an Ecuadorean tribunal that last October declared parkland drilling illegal admitted that the tribunal later overturned its decision under pressure from foreign oil companies. Cordavi has asked the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate whether any American companies, including Conoco, violated the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act by putting the squeeze on Ecuador.

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BOOKS & THE ARTS.

Contract Killer

HENRY LOUIS GATES JR.

THE ALCHEMY OF RACE AND RIGHTS. *By Patricia J. Williams. Harvard. 263 pp. $24.95.*

A few weeks ago, investigators sent pairs of black and white "testers" to the Washington, D.C., branch of the employment agency franchise Snelling and Snelling. They dressed identically and presented identical résumés, but in every case, the black candidates were told that no openings were available, while the white candidates were coached for interviews and swiftly steered toward jobs. Asked about the disparity, a spokesperson for Snelling and Snelling implied that the firm adhered not only to the letter of the law but the spirit beyond it. That's just what worries me.

We've had plenty of proposals for correcting the letter of the law; part of what makes Patricia J. Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* so unusual is its vision for healing the spirit of the law. Actually, within the conventions of legal writing, it's enough of an offense that she *has* a vision. She is, she explains, "trying to create a genre of legal writing to fill the gaps of traditional legal scholarship." This is, if anything, a modest description of what she's up to.

Let me say at once that *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* is one of the most invitingly personal, even vulnerable, books I've read. What will be harder to forgive is that Williams has also produced a work at the cutting edge of legal theory. It's about contracts and communion—"pretty much what I always write about," she says—and what it feels like when your local Benetton's won't buzz you in. It's about perspectivism in the law—and about grown-ups who assure their children that there's no difference between a wolfhound and a Pekinese. It's the diary of a black woman law professor—and a chronicle, too, of a decade of debate in the legal and literary academy [see Jon Wiener, "Law Profs Fight the Power," September 4/11, 1989].

Henry Louis Gates Jr., co-editor of Transition *magazine, attended Yale University School of Law between September 1, 1975, and October 1, 1975.*

Williams's book crisscrosses so many boundaries that you forget where they used to be. Which part is "theory," which "autobiography"? Which is the example, which the proposition? You might argue, in fact, that *Alchemy* is first and foremost a meditation on example. For good reason: Case law is all about example. It's founded on the legal doctrine of *stare decisis* ("Let the decision stand"), of respecting precedent, of leaving well enough alone.

"Most of us," she writes, "were taught that our heartfelt instincts would subvert the law and defeat the security of a well-ordered civilization; but faithful adherence to the word of law, to *stare decisis* and clearly stated authority, would lead as a matter of course to a bright clear world in which those heartfelt instincts would, like the Wizard of Oz, be waiting." Williams's problem is that she can't help wondering about things she's been instructed to pay no attention to. Who *is* that man behind the curtain anyway, she wants to know.

By refusing to play by the rules of relevance, to stay behind those velvet ropes, Williams manages to cause no end of trouble.

A law instructor talks about the competing job applicants, X and Y. Williams wonders what the abstraction—examples posing as principles—leaves out. "X, the simple crossing of two lines, the intersection of sticks; Y, the cleaned bones of a flesh-and-blood referent," she muses. "There is something seductive about this stone-cool algebra of rich life stories. There is something soothing about its static neutrality, its emotionless purity. It is a choice luxuriantly free of consequences." Conventional "black letter" courses make the law safe from lawyers by teaching a supposedly "neutral" concept of relevance, teaching which differences make a difference and which must be ignored. It's just good sense, strategically speaking. If you regulate which questions can arise in the first place, there's less at stake when the time comes to argue about the answers. And by refusing to play by the rules of relevance, to stay behind those velvet ropes, Williams manages to cause no end of trouble.

Not long ago, Williams tells us, she was walking down New York City's Fifth Avenue behind a couple engaged in a conversation with their 4- or 5-year-old son. The boy had been complaining about big dogs. Why was he afraid of them? Because they're *big*, he explained.

> "But there's really no difference," said the mother, pointing to a large slathering wolfhound with narrow eyes and the calculated amble of a gangster, and then to a beribboned Pekinese the size of a roller skate, who was flouncing along just ahead of us all, in that little fox-trotty step that keeps Pekinese from ever being taken seriously. "See?" said the father. "If you look really closely you'll see there's no difference at all. They're all just dogs."

"Talk about your iron-clad canon," Williams reflects at the time. "Talk about a static, unyielding, totally uncompromising point of reference. These people must be lawyers." And she moves on to a brilliant discussion of how we are taught not to experience what we experience, not to know what we know. Before you know it, she has displayed the logic by which group interests are trumped by, say, "finding the one four-year-old who has wrestled whole packs of wolfhounds fearlessly to the ground," then "using that individual experience to attack the validity of there ever being any generalizable four-year-old fear of wolfhounds."

From a passing exchange on Fifth Avenue, Williams unpacks an entire metaphysics. So why do I feel a little guilty about that slavering wolfhound, seemingly the Willie Horton of the canine world? You wonder if the dog is bad or just misunderstood. But notice that her example also carries a warning about the use of examples (in this case, the 4-year-old superboy). It's not just that her prose is porous and interrogative. She has a knack for keeping you just a bit off balance.

Williams shows us the ways in which experiential knowledge is slighted, so that "children's, women's, and blacks' power is actually reduced to the 'intuitive' rather than to the real." Reclaiming the authority of lived experience is no small part of her

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brief. But she's equally concerned with the limits of exemplification. She warns against the tendency to "universalize the lone black voice" ("Our maid is black and *she* says that blacks want . . . ").

Or again: Williams refuses both the claims of jurisprudential "objectivity" *and* the shoulder-shrugging relativism of "stand-point epistemology," in which "you have every right to think that that wolfhound has the ability to bite off your head, but that's just your point of view." Easy either/ors are not her style. Williams is an apologist for no party, not even, so it seems, her own.

Like the facts they're composed from, examples are awfully stupid things. For one thing, an example is never just an example—which is to say, it's never completely subordinated to the proposition it's supposed to exemplify, though the law of precedent would be easier if it were. Then, too, how do you decide, as *stare decisis* requires, that two examples are "the same"?

One approach is not to try at all. Faced with the quantitative explosion of case law in the early part of the century, the legal realists argued—more successfully in the academy than in the courts—that judges pretty much made things up as they went along anyway, being constrained by their instincts and sense of justice rather than those precedential strictures to which they paid obeisance. The problem wasn't so much that the realists were wrong, but that many judges didn't like to see themselves that way. The "Restatement" movement provided a way out for those who wanted to believe in a formalist jurisprudence based on neutral principles.

Starting in the 1920s, the American Law Institute has tried, with King Canute–like optimism, to kill examples by codification. A vast mishmash of case law, bureaucratic edict and legislative decree would be reduced to their general principles, a legal abacus for any occasion. The result was an orderly Restatement of torts, contracts, property and so on. The debate over the Bork nomination was probably the last great gasp of that kind of formalism. Most judges, whether conservative like Richard Posner or liberal like Patricia Wald, subscribe to notions of law as less formal and more "realist" than the Restatement movement suggests. In fact, realist thinking has become part of the machinery of the American Law Institute as it tries to rationalize more and more of the legal landscape. When its com-

POEMS

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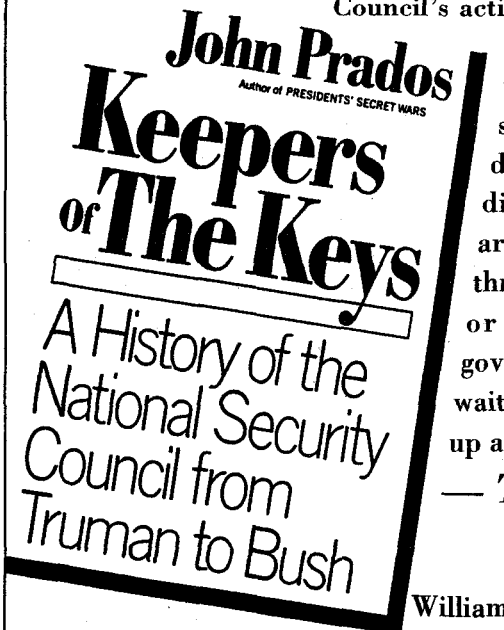
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mittees reconvened over the years to produce Second Restatements, the results were generally messier than what they replaced. But maybe not messy enough.

I've sometimes thought it would be useful if the American Law Institute would apply its churning sausage machine to produce restatements of legal *theory*. How tempting it would be to have first and second restatements of the schools of legal realism, legal process, law and economics, constructivism or critical legal studies. And, I'm afraid, one rather predictable way of misreading—or maybe I should say "spirit murdering"—this book is to regard it through the eyes of the sausage maker, as an inchoate assemblage of observation and anecdote awaiting a tidy systematic restatement. Well, you can if you want. But that would be to ignore the brunt of Williams's argument. The book's themes and storytelling technique speak to the same point: Differences are not to be sacrificed at the altar of formalism.

Williams validates her technique in the practice of it. Her readings invigorate familiar controversies: If you thought there was nothing new to be said about Howard Beach or Eleanor Bumpurs, Tawana Brawley or Baby M., read Williams on them. But some of the most magical turns of argument flow from far less public events. She's sometimes a witness, sometimes a participant, sometimes the defendant.

Few things are outside Williams's compass. She takes in a rap singer, L.D. Shore, who has achieved fame as the "Black Elvis" ("divinely parodic," as Williams notes: "Elvis, the white black man of a generation ago, reborn in a black man imitating Elvis"); a chief of obstetrics in Los Angeles who had a policy of performing caesareans and simultaneous sterilization for pregnant women on welfare who had three or more children; a black child born, through artificial insemination, to a white mother and father (the mother is suing for damages, to recover for the emotional trauma visited upon a black child in a racist society); a grand-aunt of hers who passes for white and renounces her family . . . until she needs them again; white tourists who take walking tours of Harlem (Easter services are "quite a show," the tour guide promises); syphilitic Negroes dying in stages under doctors' care.

Though Williams's method is in no small part confessional, she refuses to lay any special claim to victimhood. She writes as incisively about the social dynamics of "genteel" anti-Semitism as she does about her own experience of sexism and racism (it's with some regret that I reduce the pungent particularity of her account to those sash-weight "isms").

But in law, as in life, no good deed goes unpunished. At the end of one of her chapters, Williams reproduces (in modified form, for legal reasons) the comments made about her work by the editors of a law review: "Since you have a very poetic way of writing, you should consider writing short stories. As it is, this piece is far too personal for any legal publication, and furthermore, if you don't mind our saying so, its publication anywhere will risk your being perceived as quite unstable in the public eye."

Our judges are, in short, ventriloquists: Their decisions voice only what the law says. If they are well trained, in fact, we hardly notice their lips move.

The first person has always been troublesome in the language of law. Judicial authority is to be sharply distinguished from the authority of actual judges. Our judges are, in short, ventriloquists: Their decisions voice only what the law says. If they are well trained, in fact, we hardly notice their lips move. Williams, spoilsport that she is, won't play along. She moves her lips and makes sure you notice. Now, there are library shelves of desiccated treatises urging, in the somber tonalities of institutional discourse, that the personal is the political. Lord knows I've suffered through a few myself. But Williams performs what she calls for, and that makes all the difference.

And she's refreshingly free from academic partisanship. Too many law-review articles ritually flag their allegiance to critical legal studies with forty-seven tangential footnotes citing Duncan Kennedy on Form and Substance and Roberto Unger on Knowledge and Politics. Enough already. Williams thinks that critical theory "has valuable insights to contribute to debates about the ethics of law and the meaning of rights; yet many of those insights have been buried in relatively arcane vocabulary and abstraction." She doesn't freight her prose with references to its father figures, and she isn't afraid to take issue with some of its guiding presuppositions. In fact, critical legal studies is as much a target of her analyses as liberal jurisprudence.

Take, for example, her stand on "informality" and rights rhetoric. Critical legal studies purists generally have no time for legal formalism; they see the whole rhetoric of "rights" as so much bourgeois mystification—legal fictions that can be used to rule out progressive remedies (Mark Tushnet and Alan Freeman have written powerful essays to that effect). Besides, anything that's been a staple of legal liberalism for so long has to have *something* wrong with it. Get away from the legal formalism of "rights," the crits urge, and talk about real "needs."

Not so fast, says Williams. "Deconstructing" rights talk may be fun and easy. But try finding something to put in its place. Even if rights aren't an end in themselves, she argues, "rights rhetoric has been and continues to be an effective form of discourse for blacks," while "describing needs has been a dismal failure as political activity," so that "the battle is not deconstructing rights, in a world of no rights; nor of constructing statements of need, in a world of abundantly apparent need." As she points out, for blacks "the prospect of attaining full rights under law has been a fiercely motivational, almost religious, source of hope ever since arrival on these shores," and the highhanded disdain for rights talk among critical theorists trivializes an important aspect of black experience.

But neither is she content with the strictly formal equality of opportunity by which conventional liberalism would address racial injustice; it may have "put the vampire back in its coffin, but it was no silver stake." (Personally, I'm beginning to wonder if there *is* a silver stake.) Again, no easy either/or. Indeed, she inveighs against what she calls "punitive literalism," arguing that "the extent to which technical legalisms are used to obfuscate the human motivations that generate our justice system is the real extent to which we as human beings are disenfranchised."

Williams's take on rights is part of a larger argument. Crits often rail against the alienation and distance that formality imposes on human relations. They value fluidity, solidarity, the prospect of personal encounters unencumbered by hierarchy and rules. This sounds nice in

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principle; but as minority scholars like Williams point out, if you're a minority, those are precisely the situations in which you're most vulnerable. One attraction that the military has for many blacks, Richard Delgado suggests, is that because it *is* so highly structured, the operation of race prejudice is relatively circumscribed. Reasonably enough, blacks feel at risk in less formal environments where personal discretion counts for more. Unlike many crits, Williams wants to build on liberalism, not just bash it. That doesn't necessarily make her less "radical" than the purists of legal leftism, but it does suggest that like many minority intellectuals, she has less patience for idle utopianism. By and large, the position of black America is too precarious to ignore matters of practical consequence.

Williams's fascination with the idea of the social contract—which may reflect the sense that she wasn't quite a party to it—and her attempt to "reduce the all-encompassing social contract to a manageable private context" is another point that separates her from conventional critical legal studies and connects her with the liberal tradition, with its contractarian theories of justice. Just as she scants the usual either/ors, she eludes the usual polarities of legal theory and politics. This is by careful design, I think.

In the same spirit, Williams eschews up-against-the-wall-style rhetoric in favor of dialogue and diagnosis. "For people who don't believe that there is such a thing as institutional racism, statements alleging oppression sound like personal attacks, declarations of war." The kind of transformation she has in mind can't be accomplished by lugging baseball bats to Bensonhurst. "It does no one much good," she avers, "to make race issues contests for some Holy Grail of innocence." She maintains that "generalized notions of innocence and guilt have little place in the struggle for transcendence; there is no blame among the living for the dimensions of this historic crime, this national tragedy." But there's nothing quietistic about this book. In luminous, supple prose, Williams helps us imagine the alternatives we need. And what some will condemn as her personalism—which I would describe, rather, as her refusal of impersonalism—proves an indispensable element of her own alchemy.

Maybe some part of us wants the authority of law to remain, like the Great Oz, a levitating sphere of smoke and fire, to speak for us in the basso profundo of

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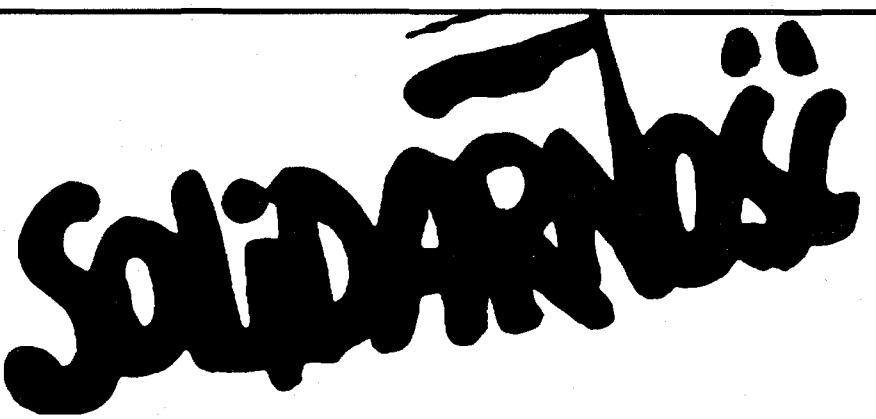

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our fears and to solve all our problems by distributing wizardly certificates of merit. If so, it may be time to join Williams in recognizing the possibility of a legal system as a communal enterprise and responsibility, a meeting place of contract and communion. The law needs a brain . . . and, even more, a heart and some courage. Certificates won't help. This book just might. □

Morte d'Auteur

JOHN LEONARD

IMMORTALITY. *By Milan Kundera. Translated by Peter Kussi. Grove Weidenfeld. 345 pp. $21.95.*

We are at the end of Europe, the end of history, the end of culture and the end of this novel, in deck chairs at a health club with a swimming pool. We can look at ourselves in twenty-seven mirrors on three sides of the rooftop club, or we can look through the fourth wall at a panoramic view of Paris. Milan Kundera is talking to one of his characters in *Immortality*, the accused rapist and guerrilla tire-slasher Professor Avenarius. He seeks a metaphor. To Avenarius, he says, "You play with the world . . . a melancholy child who has no little brother." Avenarius smiles, very much like a melancholy child, and then remarks. "I don't have a little brother, but I have you."

And we have Kundera, a 62-year-old melancholy child, a little brother of the bloody borders and the lost faith. He has written this novel in front of our eyes, out of chance encounters with enigmatic strangers, and radio news reports of anomalous events, and imaginary conversations among the lofty likes of Goethe and Hemingway, and snippets of books, and shards of memory. He has interpolated little essays—on journalism, sentimentality, coincidence, astrology and the phases of the erotic moon—that turn out, of course, not to have been digressions at all. Everything fits inside with a satisfying snap, like the hasp on a jewel box or the folding of a fan. Left in the air, like smoke, are ghosts and grace notes.

I'm sure there's a musical analogue; there usually is, in Kundera's fiction: Mozart's *Don Giovanni* or Beethoven's last quartet or any one of sixteen fugues by Bach. Our lives "are composed like music," Kundera told us in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. "Guided by his sense of beauty, an individual transforms a fortuitous occurrence . . . into a motif, which then assumes a permanent place in the composition of the individual's life."

Certainly, in *Immortality*, there's a lot of Mahler.

But along with linear time, Romantic poetry, modern art, the idea of progress, the ardor of revolution and the consolations of nostalgia, he has also given up on music. "Romantic music," we're told, "can be heard every time some statesman is murdered or war is declared, every time it is necessary to stuff people's heads with glory to make them die more willingly. Nations that tried to annihilate each other were filled with the identical fraternal emotion when they heard the thunder of Chopin's Funeral March or Beethoven's *Eroica*." Kundera himself explains that "music taught the European not only a richness of feeling but also the worship of his feelings and his feeling self. . . . Music: a pump for inflating the soul. Hypertrophic souls turned into huge balloons rise to the ceiling of the concert hall and jostle each other in unbelievable congestion."

Whether this constitutes a symbolic patricide—Kundera's father, mourned so lovingly in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, was a musicologist—I can't say. But it leaves us lonelier in Paris than we were before we ever met Agnes (a computer expert and "the clear-minded observer of ambiguity") or her sister, Laura (a *haute couture* shopkeeper and "the addict of ambiguity"), or Agnes's husband, Paul (a clever lawyer and "the simpleton of ambiguity").

Laura, because she thinks she loves Paul, plays Mahler on a white piano and collects money for African lepers in the Paris Metro system. Agnes, because she decides she doesn't love Paul anymore or not enough, leaves Paris for Switzerland, where her father and her money are both stashed. Paul, who's come to deplore Mahler as much as rock and roll, and to despair of Western civilization, drinks too much. Professor Avenarius meets Laura in the Metro when she's humiliated by *clochards*, seems never to have heard of Agnes and hires Paul to defend him against the charge of rape. (Though there's always a lot of rape in Kundera novels, this one didn't happen.)

I neglect Rubens, who renounced art in favor of erotomania, because he is one of Kundera's several wicked surprises. So I won't tell you about his affair with the lute player, also known as the Gothic Maiden, and their stroll among "the severed heads of the famous dead." Besides, you've met him before. Like Zemanek in *The Joke*, Jaromil in *Life Is Elsewhere*, Klima in *The Farewell Party* and Tomas in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he's a compulsive womanizer. There are signs here that Kundera is at last as weary of Don Juan and his roundelay of one-night stands as he wearied earlier of Don Quixote. But there are signs here that Kundera has wearied of everything else too, even laughter: "Humor," says Avenarius, "can only exist when people are still capable of recognizing some borders between the important and the unimportant."

These people are unhappy because God is dead, and neither sex nor politics will guarantee them a life everafter. They're short on meaning and being. In all of European culture there are only fifty or so geniuses (fifty-one, counting Kundera) who deserve remembering after they have gone. Laura, Agnes, Paul, Rubens and Avenarius are not among these happy few. ("Class inequality is but an insignificant shortcoming compared to this insulting metaphysical inequality.") Kundera plays them on his fiddle. Or, to stick to his own quite wonderful conceit of the clock in Old Town Square in Prague, with the twelve apostles and the bell-ringing skeleton, he pops them in and out of his narrative like marionettes. In a world of "many people, few ideas," not even their unhappiness is original. They've borrowed it, like their gestures, from Goethe, Beethoven and Napoleon; from Tycho Brahe and Robert Musil; from Marx and Rimbaud. In one thirty-page section midway through *Immortality* Kundera mentions Lacan, Apollinaire, Rilke, Romain Rolland, Paul Eluard, Knut Hamsun, Cervantes, Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky. In spite of all this culture, Europe got Auschwitz and the Gulag. Somebody must be doing something wrong, so everybody will be punished.

According to Paul, who is about to be fired from a radio station where he has a commentary program, "High culture is nothing but a child of that European perversion called history,"

> the obsession we have with going forward, with considering the sequence of generations as a relay race in which everyone surpasses his predecessor, only

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> to be surpassed by his successor. Without this relay race called history there would be no European art and what characterizes it: a longing for originality, a longing for change. Robespierre, Napoleon, Beethoven, Stalin, Picasso, they're all runners in the relay race, they all belong in the same stadium.

To which the man who will fire him replies:

> If high culture is coming to an end, it is also the end of you and your paradoxical ideas, because paradox as such belongs to high culture and not to childish prattle. You remind me of the young men who supported the Nazis or communists not out of cowardice or out of opportunism but out of an excess of intelligence. For nothing requires a greater effort of thought than arguments to justify the rule of nonthought. I experienced it with my own eyes and ears after the war, when intellectuals and artists rushed like a herd of cattle into the Communist Party, which soon proceeded to liquidate them systematically and with great pleasure. You are doing the same. You are the brilliant ally of your own gravediggers.

This, of course, is Kundera's right brain talking to his left. Indeed, the novelist, eavesdropping on this exchange as if he hadn't made the whole thing up himself, is reminded of another of his characters in another of his novels, Jaromil in *Life Is Elsewhere*. Like Paul (and Rimbaud), Jaromil felt it necessary "to be absolutely modern." He, too, was the "ally of his gravediggers." Kundera counts on us to remember on our own that Jaromil—an amalgam of Rimbaud, Lermontov and the Czech "proletarian" poet Jiri Wolker—was everything the novelist despises about modernism: its confusion of youth, poetry and revolution; its muddling of the vanguard and the avant-garde. Since Jaromil, in the storied Czech tradition of the Bohemian Catholic governors in 1618 and of Masaryk in 1948, was defenestrated, I'm somewhat surprised Paul doesn't take a header out of the panoramic window of the Paris penthouse. But the surprise death in *Immortality* is reserved for someone else. Paul, instead, declares it is time "at last to end the terror of the immortals. To overthrow the arrogant power of the Ninth Symphonies and the *Fausts*!"

Clever, yes? Yes. And so are Kundera's "existential mathematics," his listing of the varieties of coincidence—mute, poetic, contrapuntal, story producing, and maybe even morbid—he has employed to keep us turning his pages. Equally clever is Goethe's reminding Hemingway, in the middle of a chat in the afterlife, that they are both "the frivolous fantasy of a novelist who lets us say things we would probably never say on our own."

The trouble with this cleverness is that it also reminds us we've been here before, with the sendup of Pavel Kohout in *The Joke*; with the sendup of Dostoyevsky and Gide in *The Farewell Party*; with the sendup of Nietzsche, Tolstoy and Sophocles in *Unbearable*; with the sendup of Milan himself as the misogynist Boccaccio in *Forgetting*. The essay in *Immortality* on imagology (ad agencies, public opinion polls) is inferior to the essay in *Unbearable* on kitsch ("kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human nature"; "a folding screen set up to curtain off death," to "deny shit"), just as the meditation on *Grund* (a German word for reason in the sense of a cause, "a code determining the essence of our fate") is inferior to the meditations in *Forgetting* on *lítost* (a Czech word meaning "upsurge of feeling") and in *Unbearable* on *soucit* (a Czech word meaning "human co-feeling").

It's not as though he hadn't already

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told us in *Laughable Loves* that sex is powerless against socialism; or in *Elsewhere* that poets will always sacrifice shopgirls for the good opinion of the revolution; or in *Farewell* that "Western culture such as it was conceived at the dawn of the modern age, based on the individual and his reason, on pluralism of thought, and on tolerance," has come to a violent end; or in *Forgetting* that cultural progress is no longer possible; or in *Unbearable* that *Einmal ist keinmal*: The horror of history signifies nothing.

We've even been with him into swimming pools before, maybe for lightness of being.

Nor, really, do we need Laura's skirt flying over her head in the Paris Metro, among rioting *clochards*, to remind us of the humiliation of other women in other Kundera novels: Helena and laxatives; sex-starved Alzhbeta and sleeping pills; pregnant Ruzena and the poison capsules; the spinster, in "Edward and God," on her knees; and Tereza, in shame, on the toilet. Avenarius may be innocent of rape, but Lucie in *The Joke* was a victim of its viciousness, and we were encouraged to believe that Sabina, with her bowler hat, dreamt about it, and we can be pretty sure that Kundera does. About all his eros, there is a sadistic and masochistic edge—the whistle of the whip. Even mothers tend to be monsters. Jakub in *Farewell* pictures his own birth: "He imagined his tiny body sliding through a narrow, damp tunnel, his nose and mouth full of slime."

Even women with whom we are expected to identify, like Tamina in *Forgetting*, like Agnes in *Immortality*, belong to men in the molecules of their memory: Tamina to her dead husband, Agnes to her dead father—although there's an indication here that Kundera may have briefly entertained another role for his women to play besides the pathetic, one that's not so metaphysically insulting. I'll make fun of that in a minute.

If there is much that's familiar in *Immortality* from the other novels, there is also a great absence. That absence, except for the clock in Old Town Square, is Czechoslovakia, particularly Prague, the capital of Kafka and forgetting. We're in Paris, to which Kundera fled in the mid-seventies, but we might as well be anywhere. Paris is irrelevant to *Immortality*, a deracinated novel, a sacred monster-ego, one of those severed heads of the famous dead by which Rubens and his Gothic Maiden stroll. This head makes witty remarks ("Napoleon was a true Frenchman in that he was not satisfied with sending hundreds of thousands to their death, but wanted in addition to be admired by writers"), but it floats, on the water, in the air, trailing its nerve-strings like cut cables.

There's no hint here of the intersection of the personal and political that made *Forgetting* a masterwork: the magic circle of Young Communists, levitating angels in "a giant wreath," from which Kundera fell; the slit throats of six ostriches and six poets; the passage of the totalitarian state from a Bach fugue to a twelve-tone "single empire" to the abolition of notes and keys; the statues of Lenin growing "like weeds on the ruins, the melancholy flowers of forgetting." This same intersection was also the key to *Unbearable*. Not all the violence belonged to the Russians; there was a lot of it in Tomas before the tanks came to Prague in 1968.

(Oddly, it was this personal violence that was omitted from the overpraised movie version of the novel. Yes, Lena Olin, as Sabina, did for bowler hats what Pythagoras did for triangles and Melville did for whales: She gave them a whole new meaning. But the old meanings got lost. In the novel, the bowler is a sex-games prop, a memento of her father, "a sign of her originality" and something else. When Tomas and Sabina look at each other in the mirror, at first it's comic. But, suddenly, "the bowler hat no longer signified a joke; it signified violence; violence against Sabina, against her dignity as a woman. . . . The fact that Tomas stood beside her fully dressed meant that the essence of what they both saw was far from good clean fun . . . it was humiliation. But instead of spurning it, she proudly, provocatively played it for all it was worth, as if submitting of her own will to public rape." Likewise, the movie lets Tereza swim in one of Milan's pools with other naked women, but leaves out her dreams about it, in which "Tomas stood over them in a basket hanging from the pool's arched roof, shouting at them, making them sing and do kneebends. The moment one of them did a faulty kneebend, he would shoot her.")

Last summer in Prague, Czech writers complained to American visitors that not only had Kundera deserted them but he was so busy designing himself a Nobel Prize, he hadn't managed to say a word on the Velvet Revolution, when history resumed, not having come to the end he predicted; and so did European culture, but strangely without him. I don't know

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when he finished *Immortality*—the copyright is 1990—and therefore can't tell you whether he chose deliberately to ignore this astonishing and essentially nonviolent sea change, or it arrived too late to be thought about this time around, or he no longer cares at all anymore. Besides, what writers do best is gripe.

But history doesn't end; it *can't*; it's internalized, in nations and cultures and families and lovers. There's no reason to believe that we don't evolve, for better or worse, in the history of our cultures like the species in its Darwinian messiness, as much a consequence of chance, contingency, compromise and quirk as of necessity and design; with some adaptations that are nifty, and some inefficient, and some full of surprising surplus value. Surely cultures are their own feedback loop, susceptible to Chaos and Catastrophe Theory, and capable of rearranging themselves in a hot flash after an idea or a bomb, like Islam or the Mafia or the Party line. And surely individual citizens tend to recapitulate the culture, as ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. The Khmer Rouge was implicit in the brutal kings and the tenth-century Cambodian command economy of slaves that created, in the jungle, a sandstone cosmology and a vision of thirty-two hells, those golden lions and golden Buddhas and dancing girls and corncob towers and sea-serpent cults—which is probably why Pol Pot let stand so undisturbed those temples and tombs, the bare ruined choirs of Angkor Wat. Maybe despair, like so much else, is cyclic, millennial.

I can be lofty too. For that matter, it doesn't seem to me that kitsch is anything new. What else are folk songs and fairy tales, lullabies and festivals, the shinbones of saints for sale on the roads to cathedrals, or the comfort stations of the miraculous, in the Middle Ages? Wasn't "imagology" invented by the great religions? Didn't the media, by sympathetic magic, help make possible what happened, another *Eroica*, in Eastern Europe in 1989? And yet in his very own bare ruined choirs, Milan Kundera feels himself beached; and this vastation he patrols in a canary-yellow Spenglerian doom-buggy.

What we get in *Immortality*, instead of any Czechoslovakia, is a lot of Goethe. Why, you may wonder, so much Goethe? For two reasons. First, he was "the great center,"

> a firm center that holds both extremes in a remarkable balance that Europe will never know again. As a young man, Goethe studied alchemy, and later became one of the first modern scientists. Goethe was the greatest German of all, and at the same time an antipatriotic and a European. Goethe was a cosmopolitan, and yet throughout his life he hardly ever stirred out of his province, his little Weimar. Goethe was a man of nature, yet also a man of history. In love, he was a libertine as well as a romantic. And something else . . . Goethe knew how and with what materials his house had been constructed, he knew why his oil lamp gave off light, he knew the principle of the telescope with which he and Bettina looked at Jupiter. . . . The world of technical objects was completely open and intelligible to him.

Not since Mann has another writer wanted so much to reincarnate Weimar's wiseguy, trashed by modernism. (Never mind that Kundera belongs more to Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century than to Weimar on the straddle of the eighteenth and nineteenth; to Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Secessionists. His novels are peopled with Schieles and the wild-haired women of Klimt.)

The second reason for so much Goethe is that Kundera has borrowed, with credit, his brand-new role for women right out of Part II of *Faust*. According to Paul at the swimming pool on top of

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Paris, "Woman is the future of man." (Without knowing it, though Kundera does, Paul quotes Aragon.) Paul has been drinking and thinking about his daughter and his granddaughter: "Either woman will become man's future or mankind will perish,"

> because only woman is capable of nourishing within her an unsubstantiated hope and inviting us to a doubtful future, which we would have long ceased to believe in were it not for women. All my life I've been willing to follow their voice, even though that voice is mad, and whatever else I may be I am not a madman. But nothing is more beautiful than when someone who isn't mad goes into the unknown, led by a mad voice . . . *Das Ewigweibliche zieht uns hinan!* The eternal feminine draws us on!

How seriously are we supposed to take this? Not very. Paul, after all, "the simpleton of ambiguity," is the one who says it. Kundera can't help adding that "Goethe's verse, like a proud white goose, flapped its wings beneath the vault of the swimming pool." I can no more imagine this novelist buying into the eternal feminine than I can see him abandoning the (dead) cultures of the great cities for some woodsy totem worship under the sign of Gaia, the Mother of Titans. And the last thing women need done to them, anyway, is another abstraction, another metaphor.

But where does that leave the severed head? Being melancholy, being brilliant, dreaming of gestures. As much as Thomas Mann at the end, Kundera reminds me of Vladimir Nabokov—another exile, another Bolshie-basher, another father-phile, another disdainer of the determinisms of Marx and Freud, another sacred monster of immortal art, opposed to the very idea of a "future," inventor of Zemblas. Nabokov's magic kits were also full of masks and mirrors, artist-madmen and artist-criminals, insanity and suicide, strangled wives and slaughtered sons and debauched nymphets. But I am also reminded, more surprisingly, of Ingmar Bergman.

What a tale Bergman tells on himself in his autobiography. He grew up on guilt and masks and ghosts and Strindberg. Death instead of a cuckoo popped out of the clock in the dining room. His first memory is of vomit. His prayers to Jesus to get rid of pimples and stop his masturbating "stank of anguish, entreaty, trust, loathing and despair." He hated an older brother, tried to kill a younger sister, almost never sees his many children by his several wives; or, if he does, they won't speak to him. When he sleeps he's afflicted by loathsome dreams: "murder, torture, suffocation, incest, destruction, insane anger." Insomnia is worse: "Flocks of black birds often come and keep me company: anxiety, rage, shame, regret, boredom." Autoanalysis, Lear-like rage and a madness to see through prison walls to an absent God: The greatest movie director in the history of the world has found the only cure for his dread of the dark in "film as dream, film as music. . . . The mute or speaking shadows turn without evasion towards my most secret room. The smell of hot metal, the wavering flickering picture, the rattle of the Maltese cross, the handle against my hand." All this compensatory genius, from a little boy afraid to die.

I think *Immortality* is Kundera's *The Seventh Seal*, a game against death. I think he'd feel bad anywhere, like Bergman. (I am also charmed by the title of Bergman's autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*, which was, of course, the name of the theater where Havel, and the rest of the Czechoslovaks who hadn't left

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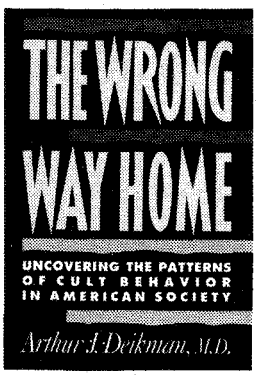

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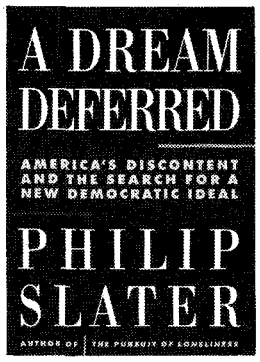

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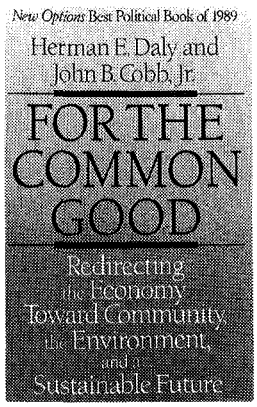
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Prague, sat down to revise their social contract, to write a civil society instead of a novel.) Kundera jumped ship before it suddenly set sail into new meanings and new beings. All his borders are scheduled to disappear next year. Somewhere Marx says that when the train of history turns a corner, all the thinkers fall off. This included Marx. And Kundera. And many other lonely severed heads. □

In Straight America

ANDREW KOPKIND

CURES: A Gay Man's Odyssey. *By Martin Duberman. Dutton. 305 pp. $19.95.*

Marty Duberman needed help. He was incurably attracted to his own sex in a time and place—America in the 1950s—when the theology of heterosexuality offered the only hope of earthly salvation. Lesbians were doomed to lonely lives as single spinsters or pairs of maiden aunts living behind dark doors. Homosexual men were fated to spend sad nights in waterfront bars and suffer short, humiliating and dangerous liaisons with hustlers to the trade. Or so Duberman believed. Determined to find the happiness and stability he assumed was his by birthright as a middle-class American man (and an intellectual, at that), he embarked on a psychotherapeutic "odyssey" that he hoped would bring him back to a Penelope and the kids in his own heterosexual home.

Lucky for him (although it seemed awful at the time), the prevailing winds were unfavorable, and the Homeric metaphor was, at last, unfulfilled. Therapy, from Freudian analysis through group psychodrama to est and transcendental meditation, failed to reorient Duberman in the direction he so desperately desired. He never stopped cruising the bars, falling in hopeless love with hustlers and disobeying the doctors' advice to make out with girls.

I am no stranger to the syndrome (since this is the ultimate confessional autobiography, a measure of confessional reviewing is obligatory). I crouched in the same musty closets in the same dreary decades that Duberman describes, and although my expectations—and desire—for reorientation were somewhat lower, I did once find a shrink who said he could set me straight. I had little choice. Having run afoul of the laws against sexual perversity in Los Angeles (now largely unenforced), I was required by my corporate employer to change trains or be terminated.

It so happened that I had to commute by air shuttle three times a week to my psychiatric sessions (the rich employer absorbed the cost), which provided an opportunity for a little therapeutic homework. My assignment was to sit next to any female passenger I found remotely attractive (or failing that, approach a stewardess) and try for a pickup. I rehearsed opening lines ("Do you fly the 8 o'clock shuttle often?") and the psychiatrist assumed the "role" of pickupee to my pickupper. In the office it worked just fine; in midair, not so well. In any case, the doctor never told me what exactly I should do if any of the gambits worked, and I never had to improvise. Having failed at even the most rudimentary stage of therapy to find a "cure," I lost faith in the psychiatric scam (without which therapy is nothing) and terminated myself—and my employment with the company that was paying the bills.

But enough about me. Duberman's stories are much scarier, and besides, he kept a meticulous journal that has allowed him to construct a moving chronicle of his transition from closet case to liberated gay man in an autobiography that is at once historically significant and personally instructive. The sexual closet is a complex institution of enormous scale with psychological and political dimensions that, because of its very nature, have never been adequately charted, much less understood. People are still dying in droves because of the strictures a repressive society places on those it chooses to call deviant. As many as one-third of the suicides among adolescent youths are thought to be related to fear of homosexuality (a federal study of the effects of homophobia on youth has been repressed by the Bush Administration precisely because it is so damaging to the prevailing mores). Those who don't succeed in killing themselves in adolescence may drink themselves to death later on, for a number of psychological and strategic reasons that are quite traceable to social repression. And now AIDS: first of all an epidemic fanned by sexual behavior developed in response to oppressive conditions and, more important, a preventable disease allowed to get out of control because of society's distaste for those who contract it.

Against such lethal dangers of closet consciousness, Duberman's complaints about roadblocks in his pursuit of personal happiness (the wife and kids problem) may seem somewhat trivial, however pained he surely was. He was a high order of intellectual star from his undergraduate days at Yale, through graduate work at Harvard and Yale again, and then an extremely early-tenured professorship at Princeton. He wrote, he produced, he overachieved. Branching out into playwriting, he won fame and prizes with his 1963 documentary/drama about racism, *In White America*. His works of history and biography were both solid and original. He had to fight off academic headhunters and he was swamped with offers to review this, declaim that, try his hand in television or film, or appear at the latest book party.

Most other lesbians and gay men of the Duberman generation never got close to such prominence. For many who internalized the loathing of their social sets, slots in the stereotypical jobs reserved for the sexually suspect were the most they could manage. Gay men could not, and would not, compete in macho, high-powered professions; lesbians avoided places that put a premium on the appearance and behavior of clichéd "femininity." Very few spent much time and money on therapy to achieve the happiness they understood from the start would be denied to them in the here and now.

But although one marvels at the degree to which Duberman was driven to be "cured," it's clear that his odyssey deeply implicates gay people of every rank and station, at every level of success in straight America. For the quality of oppression is not strained. Duberman was as menaced by homophobia as a high school kid who hangs himself or an effeminate man who will never get promoted beyond ribbon clerk at the local department store. What's more, no one has described the unmaking of a closet gay psychology and the making of a liberated gay psychology with such candid, almost squirmy detail as Duberman does here.

Since the 1969 Stonewall riot in New York kicked off the modern gay liberation movement, a small shelf of literature has accumulated that deals with "issues" of homosexuality in an abstract or clinical way, or which presents gay life as a fantasy for more or less prurient interest. Both genres are necessary and often

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amusing but finally insufficient. What was it really *like* to live as a closeted gay man in Cambridge or New Haven or New York in the 1950s? How did it *feel* when your married peers had you over to dinner, when you made up stories about your love life to please your parents, when your hustler-lover said goodbye and bedded down with his girlfriend? Most important, what was the existential essence of that moment of liberation, when you saw that the social norms you most valued were stupid and wrong, that the behavior you envied was just another ordinary variant, and that the struggle you had avoided was the only "cure" there would ever be?

Duberman doesn't find answers to all of that in his own experience, but he bravely makes the point that is now recognized as the core of the dialectic of liberation: that the personal is political, and that only by understanding our oppression in a social context can we change our lives. The discourse of liberation had regressed rather precipitously over the past decade or so, what with "human potential" courses and solipsistic therapies hogging the personal side of the dialectic. That's changing now that ACT UP and Queer Nation have energized a new generation of angry and self-confident gay people. Such movements often ignore, or even denigrate, their origins (as the New Left of the 1960s did to its Communist and radical ancestors of the 1930s). It would be a shame if that history were to repeat itself in the repoliticized gay movement. Duberman (who has founded a Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York) has given his spiritual descendants a volume about gay life that will tell them a lot about themselves, as well as about him. It's a life worth knowing. □

A Soldier's Tale

TED SOLOTAROFF

A SOLDIER OF THE GREAT WAR. *By Mark Helprin. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 792 pp. $24.95.*

It's unfortunate that Mark Helprin's engrossing new novel should be preceded by a whiff of sulfur emanating from *The New York Times Magazine* [April 28]. From this feckless piece of literary chatter by Paul Alexander, Helprin emerges as a mythomaniac, a wheeler and dealer of his literary properties, a prig and a stuffed-shirt Reaganite. Tut, tut. You can take the same ingredients, shake once, and get Honoré de Balzac. But taken together with a photograph of Helprin buttoned up in his Wall Street business suit, furtively peering out from a corner alcove of his study as though hiding from life (one imagines it was shot on the last day of Alexander's visit), you end up with an author whose new book you'd just as soon let go by.

Now and then it dawns on the interviewer that Helprin's penchant for tarting up his biography is connected to his gifts for literary invention, but this intuition goes about an inch deep and then is quickly buried by more examples and record straightening. The truth is that a novelist's fabulations begin in the self early on, narcissism and imagination getting to know each other and working together, and that the amount of con he or she produces later in public guise is usually a matter of degree. Judging from novelists I've known or heard about, Helprin's claims about his glamorous family background, his military, seafaring and mountain-climbing experience, his precocious cultural attainments and so forth fall about in the middle of the curve. Like Jay Gatsby, imaginative writers are Platonic versions of themselves and emphasize and exaggerate aspects of their background to accord with the persona they've developed, whether it happens to be that of the suburban gent or the roughneck, the French-style intellectual or the ex-prom queen, the Holocaust witness or the Park Avenue Dickens. And since the persona informs the style and its interests generate content, one can learn a lot by watching its tensions at work in the writing.

A case in point is Helprin's *A Soldier of the Great War.* Its protagonist is the complete aristocratic warrior and man-of-parts: a kind of apotheosis of Helprin's old-fashionedly glamorous c.v. Alessandro Giuliani comes out of what Helprin refers to in his story "Tamar" as one of the great contexts of nineteenth-century Europe. He is a son of a wealthy Roman lawyer, a member of the European high bourgeoisie whose combination of ambition and refinement peopled and advanced the professions and arts of a dynamic culture that curved through the major cities from Budapest to Paris. The sons of this class grew up to behave like aristocrats and think like philosophers. Hence Alessandro is quickly established as an accomplished and daring horseman, alpinist and gallant. His code of honor leads him to rush to the aid of a Jewish fellow student, Rafael Foa, who is set upon by four armed monarchists, whom Alessandro faces down with an unloaded pistol. Like Hamlet, Alessandro is placed between a martial young neighbor, who is killed in Italy's adventure in Libya in 1912, and the spiritual Rafi. He opposes the Libyan war because it is foolish and stars at his first state dinner party by the strength and wit of his arguments, which he soon develops in the press, becoming a leading voice of the opposition while still a philosophy student in Bologna, where he reads six books at a time.

All of which may seem a bit much, but it goes down smoothly, dissolving into Helprin's wide, steady flow of confident social, scenic and psychological details and a virtually unbroken succession of strong narrative moves that provide the current for Helprin's river of life. As one knows from reading his realistic stories, which range from Argentina to Israel and from the late nineteenth century to the present, Helprin has a remarkable mimetic gift. Once *A Soldier of the Great War* gets going, after a rather windy prologue set forty years later, you feel you're in the hands of one of the poetic Italian realists, a Bassani or Sciascia; at one point I found myself turning back to the title page to see who had done the translation.

Although Alessandro's field turns out to be aesthetics and painting, he is, like his creator, all eye and imagination, having learned, as he says, "to concentrate disparate forces and sensations and make them run together like music, like a song into something that has a life of its own . . . and goes in its own direction, and pulls you along with it." Which is a modest thumbnail sketch of the novel's terms of appeal: its concentration of the forces and sensations of life and death at a sustained intensity of vision and brio of performance, which keeps you reading and often marveling, page after page, all 792 of them.

Ted Solotaroff recently retired as an editor at HarperCollins. His most recent collection of essays is A Few Good Voices in My Head *(Harper & Row).*

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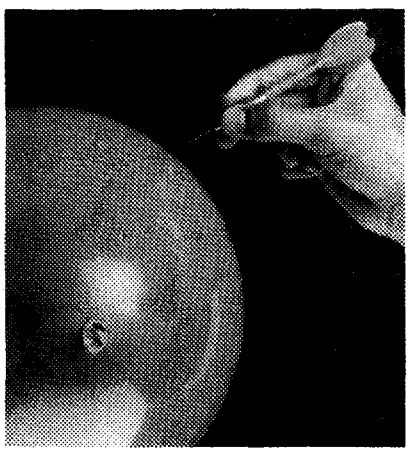

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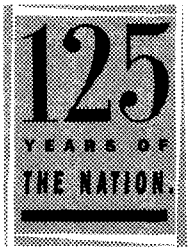

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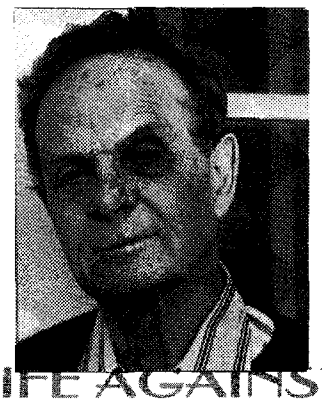

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A Soldier might also be called "The Romantic Movement at Bay." As relentlessly attracted to the heroic and transcendent as he was in *Winter's Tale*, Helprin brings his cult of the prodigious individual, his identification of the spirit with nature and art, and his obsession with mortality down from the free-floating realm of fantasy and places them in the senseless carnage of World War I, the graveyard of the Romantic movement, to show that these hallowed bones of nineteenth-century literature can still be made to live.

It's a much more audacious undertaking than the fanciful *Winter's Tale*: bringing a child back to life, building a bridge of light and creating an alternative New York in a different twentieth century. *Winter's Tale* is a children's book for grown-ups. In *A Soldier*, Helprin has to take his penchant for life's heightened possibilities and transcendent meanings down into the vile trenches and nightmarish forests and jammed military prisons of the Italian sector of the war. At the same time, often even on the next page, he has to maintain the positive pole of the dialectic of war, that it "is as various as life itself" and lies "somewhere between pure horror and pure glory with touches of both."

By setting his novel in Italy, Helprin is able to avoid the mutual mass murder and stasis of war on the Western Front. Alessandro fights in the battle of the Isonzo River, in which the Italian Army is overwhelmed, culminating in the famous retreat from Caporetto. Along with a few other survivors of the River Guard he is sent to Sicily to capture the deserters who formed an army of their own there. Later, he will be caught up in the harrowing mountain campaigns in the Alto Adige and, for comic relief, wind up riding as a clerk to an Austrian cavalry general who is faking his engagements near the end of the war.

Helprin's descriptions of war are well observed. The various terrains and weathers, the hardship and resourcefulness, the tensions and releases of infantry life, the sudden confusion and ferocity and spaciness of combat are all finely rendered. Helprin is wise in the ways that war concentrates the self, clarifies the senses, simplifies the world and brings it close. He knows how soldiers talk and brood and get on one another's nerves before combat, and how they behave in it, driven by desperation and rage and fatalism.

There is also a quiet, starkly moving section, the most memorable in the book, in which Alessandro and his comrade Guariglia, who have been captured as deserters, await their trial and execution in a prison called Stella Maris, star of the sea. Along with the daily executions they observe, the brutal haircuts and showers that recruit them for death, there is the dramatic leave-taking of the world that the location of the prison provides and, as usual, Helprin's prose rises to the occasion:

> The prison seemed to float above the sea like the plain of stars that on a clear night rides above the waters and the wind. In conversation mysterious and deep, in the crackling, hissing, seemingly inconsequential sounds of the foam, waves, and wind, the stars were talking to the enraptured sea. . . . The condemned soldiers of Stella Maris, with neither reputation to uphold, nor gain to desire, nor hope to sustain, knew the soul of the sea at night. It was their compensation and their reward.

Alessandro is an even more heroic figure in war than in peace. When three Austrians infiltrate a communications trench, he goes after them by himself, killing two and driving off the third. When the Italian position is overrun in an Alpine campaign, he kills three more in hand-to-hand combat though his arm has been cut to the bone. Later, stationed by himself in a mountain outlook post, he kills four of the enemy who invade it and then, though stabbed in the chest, he rebuilds the broken telephone that will enable him to be rescued. Next he performs an extraordinary feat of mountain climbing to reach Rafi Foa, who is dying on a ledge exposed to enemy fire; then, amid the artillery bursts, Alessandro performs a thousand-meter abseil to lower his friend's corpse and follow it down the icy ledges of the rock face so that it can be decently buried, though the line of his descent is directly into the Austrian position.

Alessandro's moral heroism is no less on tap. After taking a deserter prisoner who has twice tried to kill him, our hero himself deserts because he cannot bear to deliver a man to execution. When he is reprieved at the last minute at Stella Maris, he begs that Guariglia's life be exchanged for his, since his comrade is the father of two children.

The underlying tension of the novel is between Helprin's perceptions of the horror and glory of war. On the one hand, there is his strong sense of the grinding down of body and spirit and the breaking of the heart that Alessandro un-

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dergoes both as a soldier (along with a string of brave comrades, he also loses the love of his life in the bombing of a military hospital) and as a starved and humiliated prisoner of the Austrians and Bulgarians. On the other hand, there is Helprin's desire, approaching a need, to make Alessandro an exemplary figure of the vitality, prowess, courage, deep feeling and spiritual awareness that Helprin believes war brings out. His protagonist is alternately the masculine will in action, generating derring-do and stoicism, and the anima incarnate, tenderly possessing its objects: the sensitive son, friend and lover, the artist with his eye trained on the beauty and meaning that nature and art take on in the shadow of destruction and imminent mortality.

Helprin is particularly successful in illuminating his dark pages with the light of the world. (The novel's palette is keyed to gold.) He fills Alessandro's eyes with feasts of pastoral detail; makes the storms and tranquillity and ever-changing vistas of his beloved Alps loom like the imagination of the earth; and most of all, paints the sky with such frequent beauty that it eventually creates the sense of a heaven. In this way, he sustains Alessandro's faith in a providence of beauty, order and benevolence that transcends the madness around him, enabling him to go through it and through it and reconciling him to the death it is preparing for him.

Art is the second abiding ally of Alessandro's spirit. Two paintings in particular direct his struggle to renew and affirm it. The first is Raphael's portrait of Bindo Altoviti as a young man, which Alessandro takes as an image of his human and personal destiny. Bindo's face, a familiar type that can still be seen in young men in Rome, suggests both the permanence of art and the continuity by which fathers live on in their sons. Bindo also speaks to him, personally:

> When light filled my eyes and I was restless and could move, I knew not what all the color was about, but only that I had a passion to see. And now that I am still, I pass onto you my liveliness and my life, for you will be taken, as once I was, and although you must fight beyond your capacity to fight, and feel beyond your capacity to feel, remember that it ends in perfect peace.

The other painting is Giorgione's *La Tempesta*, which portrays a violent storm descending on a young mother and child and an enigmatic man who is standing at a remove. For Alessandro the storm is history, the man is a soldier and the

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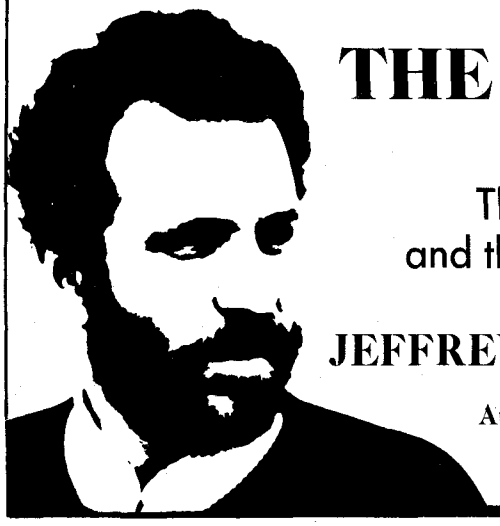

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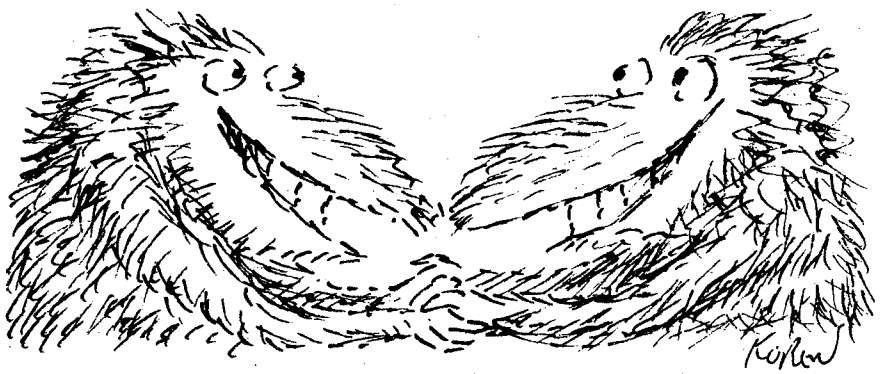

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woman and child his only hope. The painting becomes the emblem of his relationship with Ariane, the radiant young nurse whom he met after awakening from surgery (their first conversation, in which neither can see the other, is one of the glories of the novel) and soon lost. Ariane's face becomes a painting hung in his memory, and its talismanic power, like *La Tempesta*'s, keeps his ability to love alive and provides an objective for his death. "I see the faces of the people I love and they almost come alive. . . . It's as if God set loose the powers of art so that man could come so close to his precincts as almost to understand."

Helprin claims that his subject is not World War I but "the war we fight against mortality. . . . The Great War is in a sense life." While I was reading it, I could buy that; I can't remember a novel in recent years that so lit up the world for me, wiped the film of banality from my eyes and led me to the contemplation of first things and last things. But once I'd departed from Helprin's hypnotic prose, I found that little of the novel came with me. It became a trip, as we used to say: rich in sensations and sentiments but rather thin and redundant in its meaning.

Part of the problem is that in the persona of his protagonist, Helprin is all over his novel, pointing up its themes every few pages. This begins in the opening section when Alessandro, still vigorous in his 74th year, protests a bus driver's refusal to take a youth who has been running after it and ends up hiking with him some sixty kilometers up into the mountains. Nicolò, a factory worker, is bright, ambitious and illiterate, and their relationship is touching but rather relentlessly pedagogic, and it lays out the traits and truths that the old soldier and scholar will shortly be employing to die in peace. This begins to create the grooves in the novel in which the reader's moral imagination will run easily, flattered rather than challenged.

The second, related problem is that Alessandro doesn't actualize the conflict in what to live for, and face death with, that Helprin attributes to him. Early on, he has learned from the tough and gentle Guariglia, who cuts off his leg to remain with his children, as well as from the slow dying of his own father, that family love is the staff of one's inner life. Similarly, his intense sensitivity to art and nature are givens of his character. Even as he bitterly rails against the war to a sympathetic colonel, Alessandro is burn-

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ing with the hard, gemlike flame of Pater and Croce. Coupled with his physical heroism and code of honor, Alessandro's character is virtually immune to conflict, and his affirmation, like that of the paintings he admires, comes mainly from the will and descriptive power of his creator. True, he emerges from the war with a death wish that accompanies him for years afterward, but its resolution comes with his fortuitous finding of Ariane and their son, whom she was carrying, she having not been killed in the hospital bombing after all. Though Helprin handles this with a creditable narrative tact and skill, it still reminds one of Mencken's remark that Americans like tragedies with happy endings.

As a result, Helprin's view of war is lyrical rather than dramatic. The romance of arms is also one of the great contexts of the nineteenth century and one of the most discredited ones of our own. The few but close parallels to *A Farewell to Arms*, as though Helprin, as Hemingway would say, had gotten into the ring with him, point up how much more moral as well as political realism there is in Hemingway's account. As the deserter Frederic Henry (who also barely escapes execution) sums it up, "I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory, and the sacrifices were like the stockyards in Chicago, if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it." That the elderly Alessandro is still speaking about the "glory" of war after the Mussolini era seems, on reflection, loony, if not, as Henry would say, obscene.

Once Alessandro gives up his early antiwar stand, his political convictions pretty much square with his author's—that is, they are mainly used to put down any pacifist or leftist view of the war, or of society and life, that ventures into the book. The absurdity, futility and treachery of Helprin's Great War does not emanate from the opportunism of the Italian leaders who were literally bribed to take the nation into it, after having barely defeated the crumbling Ottoman Empire in Libya. Instead, there is a single lord of misrule, an upstart scribe, the hideous, mad Orfeo, who comes to be in charge of documents at the Ministry of War, which he doctors by whim, snarling up commands and supplies and sending Alessandro's comrades to their death.

Orfeo's villainy is the other side of the coin from Alessandro's heroism. Together, they point up Helprin's essentially aesthetic view of war, which robs his presentation of complexity and hence staying power. One puff of history and his Great War turns back into writing.

In his *New York Times Magazine* interview, Helprin says he decided to become a writer at 17 when he wrote a vivid description of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul without ever having seen it. Whether it's true or not, I can believe it. Helprin is the Felix Krull of contemporary fiction, blessed with a facility that enables him to inhabit virtually any subject and style he chooses and turn it and the reader to his purposes. This facility, however, has fostered a facileness of thought. War is not "as various as life itself," except to the warriors, which about 99 percent of the human race are not. Helprin needs to think against himself, to take to heart Nietzsche's great lesson to Romantic individualists like Helprin and himself that "opposition is true companionship." If he does, he could become the kind of novelist who takes a full measure of his age by giving the devil his due, as Felix Krull's creator did. □

Why We Fought

JON WIENER

THE COMMANDERS. *By Bob Woodward. Simon and Schuster. 398 pp. $24.95.*

"How the United States decides to fight its wars" is the big question Bob Woodward seeks to answer in this book, taking U.S. intervention in Panama and the Persian Gulf as his subjects. The book poses the question sharply, with its now-famous report that the nation's top general, Colin Powell, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, didn't want the gulf war. If the decision had been up to him we would have protected Saudi Arabia from Iraqi attack and waited for economic sanctions to force Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, even if that took a year or more. But the generals say Bush never asked for their advice; he kept them in the dark about his own thinking. How then did Bush choose war? The book claims to show us "the top leadership as never before, wrestling with the great questions of military and foreign policy," but it leaves us in the position of the generals, puzzled and frustrated, unable to find out how the President made up his mind.

Woodward, *The Washington Post*'s assistant managing editor for investigative news, reports that he interviewed 400 "key administration and Pentagon officials, both civilian and military," for the book, several of them a dozen times or more, during the first two years of the Bush Administration. Bush was not interviewed. The book is written in the irritating style of Woodward's Watergate-era best sellers, *All the President's Men* and *The Final Days*, in which an omniscient narrator tells the reader not just the words but also the thoughts of the central characters: "God, Powell thought, we could lose a lot of Marines." In this perverse system, crucial developments can't be mentioned unless they are put in the minds of the main characters. For example, the budget negotiations that ended October 24 were a calamity for Bush; he flipped and flopped but never gave up his commitment to tax breaks for millionaires, which aroused the normally sleepy Democrats to mock him as a lapdog of the rich. This political disaster, which filled the front pages for days, appears in the book only in Defense Secretary Dick Cheney's thoughts: He "felt that the White House's inept handling of its budget talks with Congress had cast a pall over the entire administration."

Woodward does have a system, which he patiently explains in an opening note: The interviews were conducted under "deep background" rules—the subjects would not be quoted by name or title. Much of the time that's pointless; who else could have told Woodward what Cheney was thinking? Quotation marks indicate that "at least one participant . . . specifically recalled or took notes on what was said"; Woodward did not use quotation marks "when the sources were unsure about exact wording."

Woodward never tells us his own interpretations of events; instead he provides a forum in which his central figures speak to us. The generals want us to know they are peaceniks, and that it's the maniacs in the White House who wanted war. Colin Powell doesn't say "No blood for oil," but he comes close; like the demonstrators in the streets, he knows how terrible war is and wants to do everything possible to avoid it. He wasn't the

Jon Wiener, a contributing editor of The Nation, *teaches history at the University of California, Irvine.*

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only one. Woodward reminds us that Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf described himself in *Life* as "anti-war" because "I know what war is. . . . In a lot of ways I am a pacifist." William J. Crowe Jr., retired Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also counseled patience rather than war, arguing that "waiting out the Soviet Union for 40 years would be marked as one of the great victories of all time. . . . A war in the Middle East—killing thousands of Arabs for whatever noble purpose—would set back the US in the region for a long time."

On the other hand, Cheney complained about the generals, telling Woodward he discovered "a rat's nest" in the Pentagon, "one of the great secrets: The U.S. military had thousands more nuclear weapons than necessary" and Pentagon war plans called for using them "in a way that would have done far more nuclear violence than necessary to the Soviet Union to achieve the military objectives in a war." Cheney uses Woodward to convey the message that only "presidential and civilian control over the military" can protect us from the madmen in the Pentagon. In this "debate" Woodward presents the generals more sympathetically, but maybe that's only because they gave him more of their time.

One would think the reporter who cracked the White House cover-up of the Watergate affair would be interested in the advance planning that went into the military's iron-fisted control of war news. But the issue barely surfaces in the book. We do get a few clues: The Pentagon's Crisis Situation Room, the Strangelove-styled nerve center teeming with operations specialists and intelligence analysts, is dominated by three large projection screens, one of which, we are told, was tuned to CNN. The jobs of the crisis specialists included monitoring CNN to make sure the broadcasts were, in Woodward's term, "correct." "Correct" in fact meant "good news or no news"—that's how *New York Times* reporter James LeMoyne described the Pentagon strategy for the media when he returned from assignment in the gulf in December. No one in Woodward's book asked the question Walter Cronkite posed in February: "What are they trying to hide?"

Why then did we fight in the gulf? Colin Powell worried that Bush wanted a war with Saddam Hussein from the beginning. On August 5, three days after Iraq's invasion, Bush emerged from his helicopter and told reporters, "This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait." Powell, watching CNN, said to himself, "Uh-oh!"—he was "stunned" because Bush has "set a new goal" without consulting his military advisers or the National Security Council. Powell worried that Bush was committing the country to war because of "personal and emotional" reasons. But, the book says, Bush's efforts to reverse the invasion during August and September focused on United Nations sanctions and covert C.I.A. operations rather than on preparing to drive the Iraqis out with a war.

Not until October, according to Woodward, did Bush request a military briefing on "what an offensive operation against Saddam's forces in Kuwait would look like." By October 30 Bush had made the final decision to create an offensive force by doubling the number of troops, and he had set the dates for launching the air war and the ground war. Only one element of the plan was made public: He announced on November 8, two days after the election, that he was increasing the size of American forces (effectively doubling them). The same day, the Bush Administration began a campaign to get the U.N. to set a deadline for the use of force against Iraq. Most Americans thought these moves were intended to pressure Saddam to withdraw, but the book makes it clear that the generals understood Bush had decided to fight by late October.

The timing may help explain why Bush made up his mind in favor of war. The book suggests one answer to that question: Colin Powell told Bush in early October the policy of "strangulation" would achieve the goal of forcing Saddam out of Kuwait without war but, he said, "it may take a year, it may take two years." Bush's answer is the most important thing in the book: "I don't think there's time politically for that strategy."

The President thus chose war at least in part because of political considerations, but Woodward doesn't say what they were. The book's fatal flaw is that it contains virtually nothing about the political context in which Bush made up his mind in favor of war. *The Washington Post*, among others, noted the significance of domestic political factors at the time. "Much as he would like to keep them separate, President Bush cannot insulate his Persian Gulf policy from the troubles he faces on the home front with Congress, the budget and the economy," columnist David Broder wrote on October 21. Bush's "troubles" were no secret at the time, although Woodward barely

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mentions them. As the front page of *The Washington Post* reported on October 16, when Bush was making up his mind to fight a war, "Poll Shows Plunge in Public Confidence; Bush's Rating Plummets; Overall National Mood at Two-Decade Low." Finally, Woodward never mentions that Bush's decision in favor of war was made in the midst of a midterm Congressional election campaign that was dramatizing Bush's deep political problems. For example, on October 24 the *Post* reported that Republican candidates were "running away" from Bush; "sometimes they're running against him."

No one in Woodward's book thinks about how war might affect Bush's 1992 re-election prospects. But early in November the *Post* ran a piece by David Gergen, Reagan's assistant for communications, and Kenneth Walsh, "The Bush Presidency: Running on Empty," which declared that his political strategists "ought to begin their next [election] campaign tomorrow" and "force the White House to decide—as it never has before—what it is really trying to accomplish and why voters should eventually support another four years of GOP rule." The problem was that "the Bush presidency, as his own advisers acknowledge, still has no underlying mission and therefore no message." Without a victorious war, what could Bush claim as a success when he stood for re-election? No President in memory had entered the last two years of his first term with so few domestic accomplishments, facing so many angry former supporters.

The potential domestic political benefits for Bush of a gulf war were hardly a secret during that crucial month of October, but you'd never know that from reading Woodward. "Some observers in his own party worry that the president will be forced to initiate combat to prevent further erosion of his support at home," *The Washington Post* reported on October 28, two days before he secretly set the plans for war. Woodward does not report, as Elizabeth Drew put it in *The New Yorker*, that John Sununu, the President's Chief of Staff and one of a tiny handful of confidants making the decision, "was telling people that a short, successful war would be pure political gold for the President and would guarantee his re-election."

When Woodward started interviewing his commanders, Panama was on their minds, and their preparations for that war take up the first half of the book;

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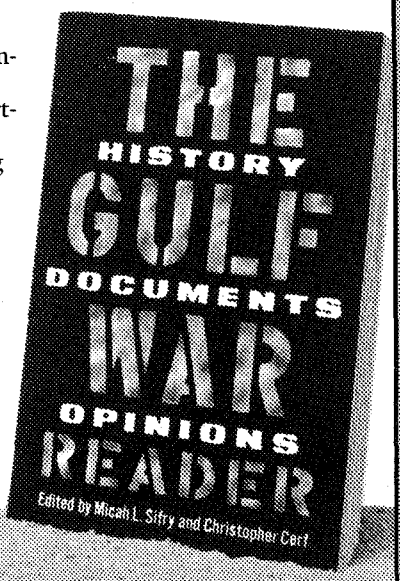

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most readers will probably skip that part—who today cares about Noriega?—and start with Saddam. Woodward notes that a few malcontents complained that our boys killed too many civilians in Panama, but he is satisfied with the military's claim that the number is closer to 202 than to 4,000. The book neglects the key lesson Bush learned from the Panama invasion: It pushed his approval ratings higher than Reagan's all-time high. Decisive military action against a foreign villain had made Bush the most popular President in modern history, until domestic problems—recession, taxes, the budget deficit, the savings and loan crisis—caught up with him. In Woodward's account it never occurs to anyone that Bush might reap even greater political benefits from going after Saddam than he did from ousting Noriega.

The Commanders ends the hour the bombing of Iraq begins. Three pages from the end Woodward has Powell working hard "to make sure the offensive showed some restraint. Collateral damage had to be minimized." Nothing in Woodward's book tells you that the air war Powell planned brought "near apocalyptic" destruction to Iraqi civilians, in the words of a U.N. report; that our bombing destroyed water, power and sewage systems, reducing Iraq to a "preindustrial age" in which surgeons operated by candlelight, without anesthesia or clean water, in hospitals whose power had been destroyed; that for our fighter pilots killing Iraqi soldiers was "like shooting fish in a barrel"; that we killed 100,000 Iraqis; that 2 million Kurds fled into exile in the wake of the war. Jonathan Schell summed up the gulf war: "We kill and they die, as if a race of gods were making war against a race of human beings."

Finally, we need to ask, What did Woodward know and when did he know it? When Woodward found out that the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed war and favored sanctions—assuming that Powell disclosed this before January 15—why wasn't that headline news in *The Washington Post*? Why did that information become Woodward's private property, which Simon and Schuster would sell to us months later for $24.95? The information Woodward possessed would have been a powerful weapon for the antiwar movement. The Senate resolution authorizing the use of force in the gulf passed by only three votes; a front-page story in the *Post*, "Nation's Top General Opposes Gulf War," could have changed them, making it considerably harder for Bush to start the war. Here the age of Reagan reaches its apogee; Woodward has privatized the news. □

Our Town

LEWIS COLE

YOU'LL NEVER EAT LUNCH IN THIS TOWN AGAIN. *By Julia Phillips. Random House. 573 pp. $22.*

Energy is Julia Phillips's stock in trade. Her best seller isn't written but spat out, a breakneck, formless performance piece about her rise and fall as a Hollywood producer. Propelled by spite and vanity, the narrative careens from past to present tense and third to first person, ricocheting off one-liners, chatty references to the famous, zingy descriptions that could come from a William Goldman script, more brand names than you'll find in a Bret Easton Ellis paragraph and comic-book graphics straight out of *Batman* (*#!?). Phillips has the soul of a microwave. She doesn't analyze, depict or wonder about people, places or things; she nukes them.

Lewis Cole has made a living as a screenwriter for fourteen years.

> "I got you the money," he says.
>
> "Thank you-u-u," I ooze through clenched teeth. I. Got. You. The. Money!@#? Then why didn't *you* run the picture for Herbie Allen while I visited my cancer-ridden mother in New York?!@#
>
> . . .
>
> Holly Knight . . . brings me beautiful black leather gloves with a gold paisley cuff, and the *pièce de résistance*: a T-shirt with Jonathan Frid, from Dark Shadows days. . . . Holly Knight is a Jewish girl from New Jersey with fat thighs, a lousy nose job, and a real gift for writing hit songs.
>
> . . .
>
> I know a lot of dead people, she [Phillips] thought . . . the price you pay for surviving into middle age . . . the price you pay for living through the seventies. Hell, sometimes she thought she fucking invented the seventies.

Only one thing slows Phillips down: freebase cocaine. Base—the smokable form of cocaine that became popular in the early 1980s—doesn't vanquish Phillips's pathological narcissism: One reason she adores the drug is that it turns her into an artist. Her love for inhaled cocaine gives her powers of analysis and emotion she otherwise lacks and elicits a tenderness that neither the author's neglected daughter nor her dying mother can summon: "Sometimes, on rainy afternoons particularly, I think of how I would stir up a batch in weather like this, and smoke, and listen to the rain, divine each raindrop and talk to it, feel its essence, commune with it, and I feel sad. Sad like you feel for a lover from long ago, and I mourn its passing, as I've mourned for friends who died too young."

Other than these isolated passages, the book is relentlessly unappealing. Occasionally, Phillips captures the mix of personal style, commercial considerations and power trips that characterizes work in the world's most glamorous industry: "Marty [Scorsese] had dressed Cybill [Shepherd] in a white knit dress, and the shot catches her ass at its widest point, not flattering from a *Vogue* point of view. I beg Marty to cut it, but he keeps saying, 'I'm Italian, and I love it.' So-o-o-o unattractive."

But mostly even the gossip disappoints. Bully to the weak, toady to the powerful, Phillips dishes no new dirt about any currently powerful public personalities. Her descriptions of Steven Spielberg and former studio mogul David Begelman—the only detailed portraits in the book—praise with faint damns. Her favorite victims are second-level, behind-the-scenes unknowns. In this regard, the book's unqualified success is surprising. Twenty years ago, movie stars excited the public's imagination. Now faceless money-men are objects of fantasy. After this best seller leaves the remainder racks more people will know what Don Simpson likes in bed than what he looks like on the street.

But Phillips's failure to transcend her sensibility and environment results in the book's one real accomplishment. Phillips has been characterized as a freak by Hollywood. Indeed, she promotes herself as one of a kind. And to outsiders her behavior—even at its most rational—must seem bizarre. But to someone like myself who knows the movie business fairly well, the main features of her story and her deeply unattractive consciousness are standard: Her only peculiarity is her amazingly early artistic and commercial success (she co-produced, in short order, *The Sting*, *Taxi Driver* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*). With everything else—including her cocaine habit—

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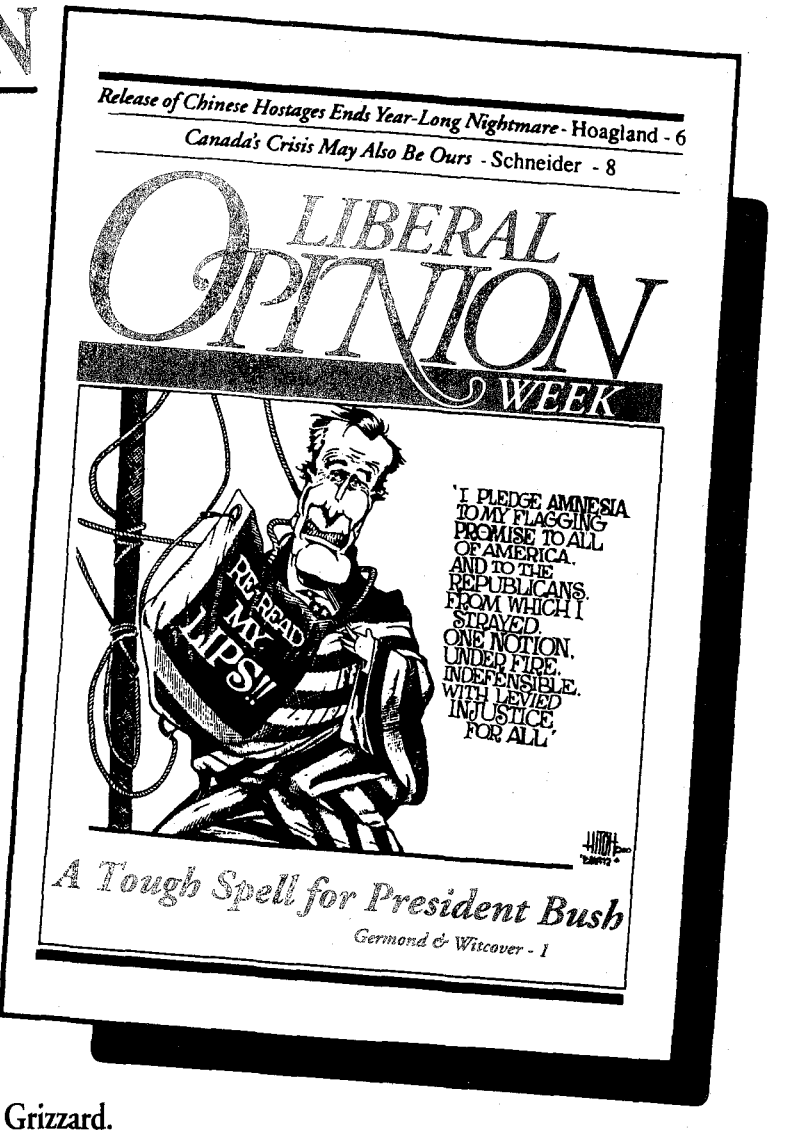
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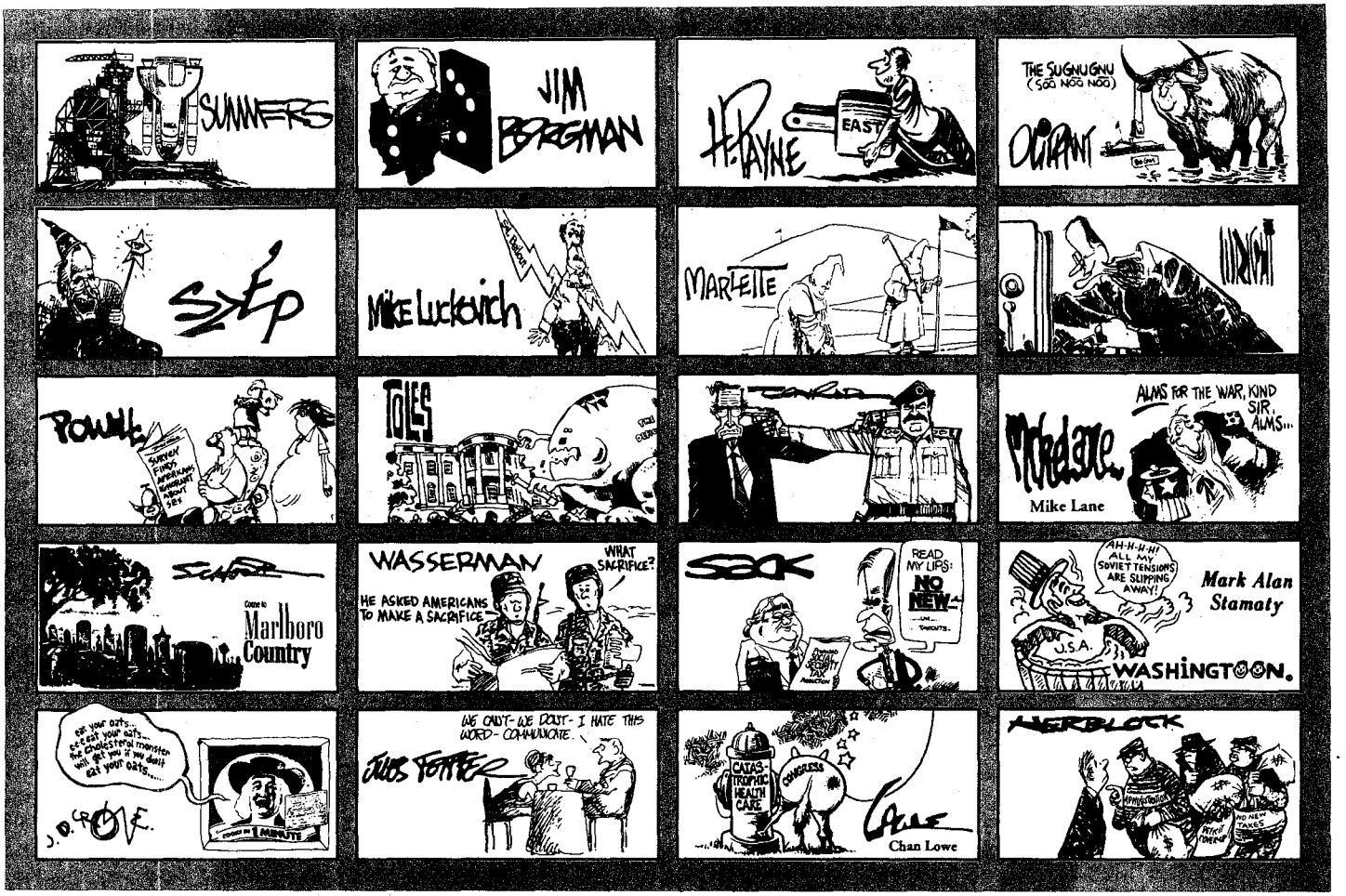

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she merely turns up the noise. Indeed, in its dulling, frantic emptiness, this volume graphically renders the tedium and anxiety of working in what must be—or what feels like—the world's largest one-company town and presents a character, Julia Phillips, who seems a quintessential product of the industry, not its pariah.

When Phillips—like a lot of other smart people—went to Hollywood in the late 1960s the movie business was in transition. Old Hollywood—independent companies owned and run by entrepreneurs who relied on stables of "creative elements" (actors, writers and directors) to produce films reflecting the boss's commercial and artistic convictions—was being replaced by New Hollywood: film divisions of multinational corporations that specialized in leisure-time products—books, records, magazines, theme parks and children's toys.

This corporatization accompanied other changes. A stagnant box office, skyrocketing production costs and the growth of the "new technologies"—VCRs and tapes—promised a gloomy future. (No one foresaw kids seeing movies many times over, the new source of the industry's superprofits at the box office.) Meanwhile, the writings of Pauline Kael and the emergence of a new generation of artistically daring and commercially successful young directors had finally legitimized films as art. Suddenly everything—not only the standard French-approved film noir classics and John Ford westerns—was dressed up in the Sunday best of high culture. "Its a Capra-esque comedy," one studio executive said to me, describing Bill Murray and Rodney Dangerfield's *Caddyshack*.

In this atmosphere of anxiety and self-importance, Phillips thrived. Luck helped; Phillips quickly got a job with David Begelman, an old-style mogul who supported his protégés. (The Begelman scandal was, partly, an internecine war between the Old and New Hollywoods.) But even without Begelman's support, Phillips possessed the two requisites for success: culture and hype. Her pedigree was New York liberal with an Ivy League degree. Her ability to "amp"—as she says—is unsurpassed. Hand her a punctuation mark and a fact becomes a tragedy. On her mother: "[My mother] came to this country when she was seven, all the way from Russia." On herself: "She was born April 7, 1944. In between. Not a war baby: fortyonefortytwofortythree; not a Boomer: fortysixfortysevenfortyeight . . . "

Her mix of energy and self-promotion was tailor-made for New Hollywood. For all the focus groups, audience response cards and marketing strategies on which Hollywood spends fortunes large enough to fund the entire Bangladesh relief program, commercial success in films—as with any cultural commodity—remains unpredictable. No genius bet that *Home Alone* would be the year's runaway success; and Steve Ross, the chairman of Time Warner Inc., reportedly spent his Christmas vacation pacing the aisle of the empty East Hampton sixplex showing *Bonfire of the Vanities* wondering why sellout crowds were thronging *Godfather III* next door.

Old Hollywood accepted this condition of the business. Studios found audiences by saturating the market with a variety of genres and stars, and moguls patted themselves on the back for daring heroic losses. But New Hollywood eschews such business macho. Production has shrunk while costs have soared; the emphasis is on sure hits, a demand complicated by the industry's lack of even commercial (much less artistic) vision. At present only Disney movies are stamped with a strong editorial hand. "Basically, all films are fairy tales," a Disney executive explained to me during one story conference. His reduction of *Raging Bull* to *The Rescuers Down Under* was the party line.

The lack of any commercial or artistic viewpoint, coupled with the pressure to find a mass audience, leads producers and studio execs to look for only one thing: energy. In comparison with Hollywood, Exxon's search for new sources of energy is restrained. Producers and execs will try to convert anything—markets (the cultivation of Latino audiences that has led to films like *La Bamba* and *The Milagro Beanfield War*), stars, sounds, time periods or genres—into new fields to exploit. What they look for in this search is not perception—the unique manner by which the artist expresses what he or she sees and hears, thinks and feels, the primary source of art's energy—but style, the presence of what's "fresh" or "hot," as the agents say.

Now, Hollywood has always promoted personal style; the wealth, glamour and publicity of the movies have always magnified the need to identify yourself by dress and manner that is part of all cultural industries. But the search for energy has put a previously unheard-of premi-

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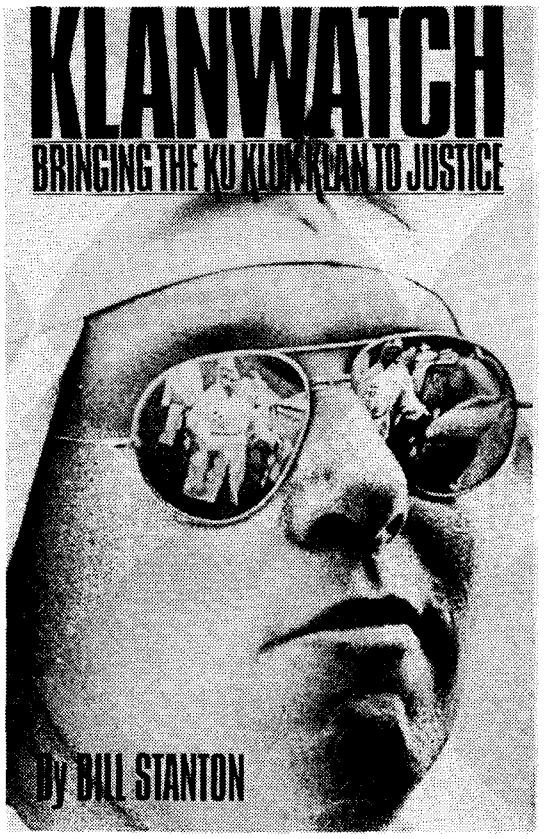
um on self-promotion and dramatization. By the end of the century, it may well be that Hollywood's greatest contribution to culture will no longer be films but the transformation of once ordinary tasks of personal hygiene, social intercourse and domestic pleasure into the art of personal style. People outside Hollywood see the vulgar amounts of money spent on beauty and interior design as indulgences; but people in the industry know this attention to clothes, food and furniture is crucial to success, because they help separate you from the pack. Quite rightly, Phillips writes her manicurist off as a business expense. You exist to exploit yourself. Phillips's shared intimacies about herself—and her family and friends—in this book only amplify a commonplace of Hollywood manners: In Los Angeles, reticence in personal matters among strangers is mistaken for rudeness. Among other things, Hollywood is the capital of fads in self-dramatization: therapy, Alcoholics Anonymous, Jewish studies groups.

The persona Phillips created was fairly standard for her background: child of a special, neurotic family ruled by a monstrous mother (a "very brilliant anti-Semitic Jew. I don't imagine she ever had a childhood. She made sure I didn't either"); friend of the artist; sophisticate whose gift of predicting popular taste ("I am a spotter of trends," she tells us again and again) lets her vent a relentless, ugly contempt toward the audience on which she depends. After a screening of *Easy Rider* she writes: "I tell [a P.R. man for the movie] that I don't like [the picture], but I think it will be a smash. I make an impression, because that is the opposite of what everyone else is telling him."

Using these tools, she began her rise, a *ronde* of seductions starting with David Begelman and ending with Steven Spielberg. Her narrative of these practical romances—they included Robert Redford, Martin Scorsese, Goldie Hawn, Erica Jong—demonstrates a curious irony of present Hollywood life. Hollywood finance may belong in the late twentieth century, but the industry's social relations are stuck in the late eighteenth. Hollywood society remains a series of courts in which individual suns—Schwarzenegger, Barbra Streisand, etc.—hold sway over satellite advisers, courtesans and hangers-on (Phillips calls Begelman "my liege" ironically, but the title is fitting). The quest for the golden grail of getting a film greenlighted is a journey perilous in which the producer or director, like Kafka's comic hero in *The Castle*, travels from one baffling audience to another, always to end at the same place: the star's inclination to commit to the project.

About these associations, Phillips has few nice things to say. This disappointment is built into the system. To begin with, the relationships are all dependent ones; like anyone who lives on handouts, Phillips detests her benefactors. Courting Goldie Hawn, she actually has no interest in the star as a person or talent. She merely wants Goldie's agreement to appear in *Fear of Flying* to propel her film out of the deadly doldrums of development. Her spiteful comments about the comedian are all hindsight; from the evidence in this book Phillips never bites the hand presently feeding her. The only people she lauds in this book are her current agent and her publisher, Lynn Nesbit and ("my pal") Joni Evans; and Anne Rice, whose vampire books Phillips still has under option. (And on the produced backs of which she still plans, I'm sure, to ride to her final revenge against Hollywood.)

The humiliation she suffered in these relationships was magnified by her sex.



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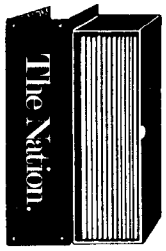

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Phillips writes that it took her years to understand women's position in Hollywood: at once on a pedestal and under the thumb. Her ignorance is disingenuous. From the beginning, Phillips understands both her power of self-presentation and its importance. "I am the same Julia I always am," she writes about her first trip to Hollywood. "But I notice that here in Hollywood it seems to have great impact. . . . Mark Rydell . . . kvells . . . through lunch: she walks, she talks, she spins great tales." Indeed, she seems to have decided quite early on to defy her second-class status as a woman by outshouting even the most aggressive males. And clearly this was why directors were attracted to work with her. On *Close Encounters* Spielberg used her as his id. Seemingly eager to pump up the cost of the film so that Columbia would be forced to promote the epic, Spielberg let Phillips fight the money-men for the checks to pay for his budget-busters. When the studio needed to discipline someone, Phillips—who was already crazed on cocaine—became the sacrifice. (Although she's never as victimized as she claims; even after her debacle, the Columbia execs kept asking her to come back.)

Being removed from *Close Encounters* seems to have broken Phillips's heart; shortly afterward she experimented with freebase. But she never spells out what the loss meant to her: humiliation, lack of power or exile from the land of fulfillment and self-expression. Curiously, Phillips's book rarely gives the reader a sense of her actual work as a producer. The reader knows what she wears—she's a fool for Alaïa—eats, snorts and who she sleeps with. But how she spends her days in the midst of producing three films is a mystery; there is practically no detail about signing actors, making deals or helping any of the "creative elements," as they say, fulfill their artistic or commercial ambitions. When Phillips describes making rock cocaine crystals we feel a kind of relief; finally she's *producing* something.

We also don't know what she likes about film. Like many Hollywood people, she disapproves of most of what she sees and doesn't seem to enjoy movies much at all. Except for an early mention of the druggie cult classic *Performance*, she never mentions any films except critically; she also never refers to scenes, shots, music scores or performances that moved her.

Her one critical comment is her sense that films should be epic, the standard early-1980s defense against the challenge of VCRs and tapes. As an agent once explained to me in 1979, the year the film he referred to won an Oscar, "You want big subjects. Like *Norma Rae*." The comment shows the speciousness of the distinction. *Roots* and *Lonesome Dove* were television movies. Yet both presented a wider, more heroic and realistic view of human experience than anything recently seen on screen. Meanwhile, Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas* had a small visual scope, easily contained by television. Yet Scorsese's use of the camera achieved a power of narrative voice quite beyond the range of television movies—even very creditable, effective ones. Through performances and what he gave the viewer to hear and see, Scorsese expanded his portrait of suburban gangsters into one of the great comic-horror visions of middle-class American life.

Phillips's own films lack any consistency of vision, theme or interest. They are simply projects whose scripts or directors Phillips wisely guessed were going to be moneymakers, new sources of energy. Indeed, her taste, her actual interests, seem unexceptional, a preference for best-selling, hard-core respectable fiction—Erica Jong and Dunne (John Gregory, not Dominick; this is the 1970s)—and self-consciously poetic ideas. (Many Hollywood people don't know how to read scripts. They love the bombastic. When the unwatchable product is released they damn the writer.) Her much vaunted ability to spot trends seems spotty. The only trend identifiable with *The Sting* was the music of Scott Joplin. When she flies on her own, her wings melt quickly. She can't attract the directors, snag the actors, land the projects. Her disdain for her own work is so profound that she neglects even to mention to the reader the subject of one film she managed to produce in the late 1980s. In my experience, this is not unusual: There is nothing of which Hollywood producers speak with greater contempt and revulsion than their own work.

Well, if Phillips isn't a sickness of Hollywood, maybe Hollywood is a sickness of America. This used to be the popular view: Hollywood was a dismissible weird excess of the national culture. But one aspect of the New Hollywood is its increasing national importance. Traditionally Hollywood always ran after New York, trying to prove its worthiness. Now the equation has reversed. The fascinations of Los Angeles—the accent on

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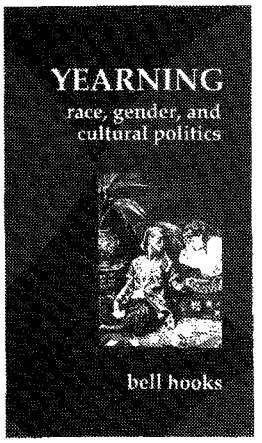

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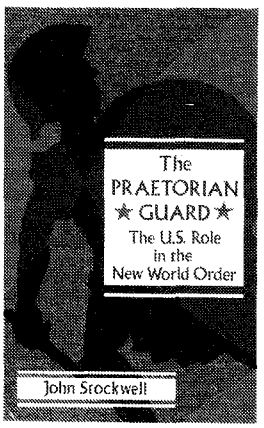

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style and privilege, the dual concentration on work and one's self—have become national preoccupations.

At the same time, the role Hollywood has played as a dream factory has changed. In the past, Hollywood was what happened to the best, the reward for talent and perseverance. The dream lives—beautiful homes, happy marriages, strife-torn careers, etc.—of the stars and moguls were enactments of people's ordinary lives on a grand scale. It's this aspect of the romance of bourgeois life that Fitzgerald dramatizes in his Hollywood novel, *The Last Tycoon*. (It's Gregory Peck as Scott, speaking to Deborah Kerr as the dutiful Sheilah Graham in *Beloved Infidel*, from whom I first heard the notion of Hollywood as a court.) His fictional creation, Stahr (inspired by Irving Thalberg) is a hero who embodies the author's dream of the self-made wealthy man, a prince who is free of both Gatsby's obsession and Dick Diver's neuroticism, a businessman as artist, a tragic hero manipulating the besieging world for the sake of art.

New Hollywood projects a radically different fantasy. Here everything is realizable because nothing possesses any real value; New Hollywood is the world of the producer, the expression on the personal level of the leveraged buyouts of the 1980s, where a company's assets were the only thing that mattered, not what it produced (if Mike Milken didn't live in L.A., the screenwriter would have had to put him there). In such a universe discrimination and judgment become obsolete. The single-minded search for the energy to supply the market has made everything—talent, experience, sensibility—interchangeable, "fungible" to use a wonderful legalism. "Never mind that they took his entire life as a man away from him," Phillips thinks about Nelson Mandela, and goes on to make a morally numbing comparison between herself and the hero: "God knows, she could relate." Not only work but the most intimate aspects of social relations embody the modernist quality of life described so eloquently by Marshall Berman in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*: "a vortex where all facts and values are whirled, exploded, decomposed, recombined; a basic uncertainty about what is basic, what is valuable, even what is real." In this Crazy Eddie's of culture, the bobby-soxed, black-leather-jacketed, spike-haired, *dancing-as-fast-as-she-can* millionaire punk staring at us from the back of this book isn't mad; she's minding the store. □

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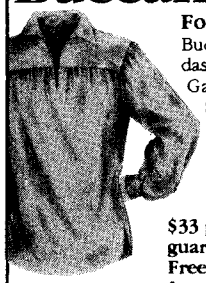

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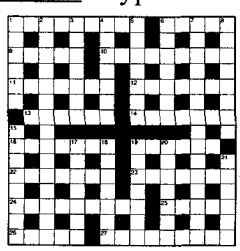

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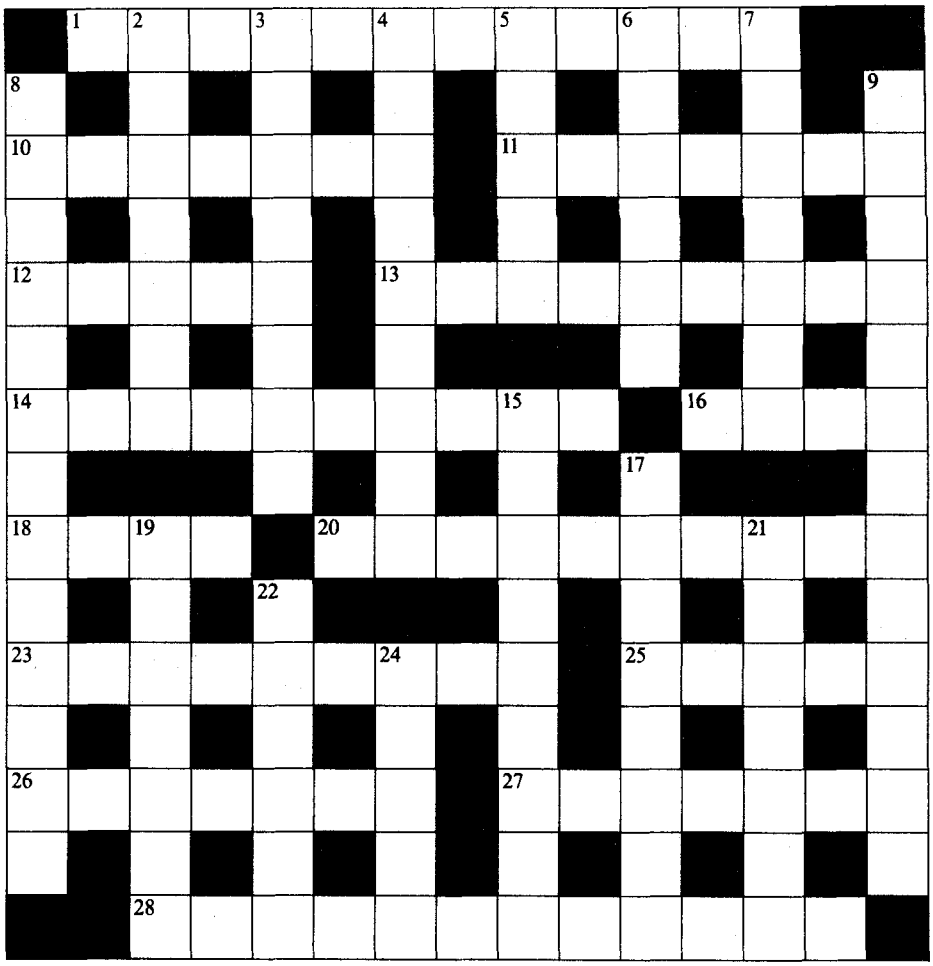

ACROSS

1 Talk of the advertising boards! You have to see it to understand it! (4,8)
10 Being not exactly true, fed out of it what might be disproved. (7)
11 One who gets people all worked up might sound almost like one in the know. (7)
12 and 13 What the inexperienced chef might give as a morning toast? (5,9)
14 The military address to a list, and to refer to in return, describing what the chef above should be. (10)
16 The emperor comes and goes, but this man sometimes has no backing. (4)
18 Possibly describing the distinction of a place in France. (4)
20 Care to have troubles on the way? You can bet on it! (10)
23 One of Rabelais's greatest characters. (9)
25 Meals prepared here associated with the witching hour? (5)
26 Didn't quite get home without stopping, since the stumble came first. (7)
27 One could put people off with such a command, and tire out. (7)
28 A song sung by the chorus when Tom's around? What is described in 12-13 might be minor ones. (12)

DOWN

2 Possibly no finer example in Italian literature. (7)
3 When twelve o'clock comes around at it, perhaps, it's a system of symbols. (8)
4 One rescued from the sea monster, and/or made better. (9)
5 One isn't happy coming to it, and sort of figures us out. (5)
6 Not a D.C. line with it, you'll agree! (6)
7 Like dodo and diplodocus, what might be a company-following in garbled text. (7)
8 Let's hope our troops don't have more than a thousand, like the literary example, with perhaps a Saudi and a Scot above such bad things. (7,6)
9 Go over a person's brain, as they say? Casual remembrances sometimes do. (5,4,4)
15 I'm not really such a person, except when I try to skate! (9)
17 The sort of hop to use when you want to see where the reindeer pause. (9)
19 This arrest could be disastrous if made by the card-carrying CIA sort. (7)
21 Concerning what one might have on the property, it's better to let go! (7)
22 Bill might be kept here also a card-carrying example. (6)
24 If you consider what I'd especially like, you'll see things that turn over and over. (5)

SEE LAST WEEK'S SOLUTION AT LEFT

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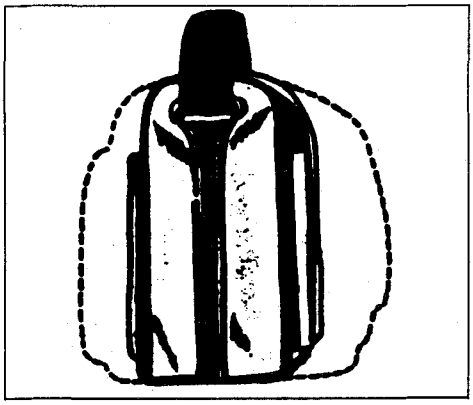

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